

## Be Careful 1: What You Wish For

Draco Malfoy huddled on the floor in his bedroom, halfway between the bed and the toilet, struggling to get his breathing under control as his throat burned from the acid.

*He killed her, and the snake ate her—first she was alive and awake and crying, and then she was dead and she fell, and then he told the snake dinner and it climbed onto the table and—*

He gagged again, but there was nothing left, and he forced his stomach to calm. He had to be strong. He couldn't disgrace the family again. They'd barely survived as it was.

*This is my home. I don't want them here. Not with what they think is funny...*

He hated the things Potter and his friends always managed to do to him, but Potter at least wasn't supposed to be on his side. These people were, and they still liked to wait in dark hallways and scare him, or jinx him from behind and laugh at his struggles to get free.

*And it isn't ever going to change. Not even if the Dark Lord wins. It'll just be more of the same, more of the strongest people taking what they want and everyone else fighting over what's left.*

*And I'm not strong. Draco pushed himself to his feet and stared at his pale face in the mirror over the sink. I never was. All my life, I tried to make people afraid of me, and inside I was terrified that they might see through it and make me afraid of them instead.*

*Well, now it's happened. The whole world knows I have no guts. Anybody can push me around if they try hard enough. And hard enough isn't very hard at all.*

Draco leaned against the wall and slid back down.

*I wish I could just disappear. Just go away. Find somewhere else, somewhere they don't know me, somewhere I could start over. Start fresh.*

A huge yawn overcame him, and he made his way to his bed and stripped off his robes. For this one night, he could sleep in shorts and undershirt.

He was asleep almost before he hit the pillow, and his only thought was to hope he didn't dream.

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Draco was awakened by someone screaming practically in his ear.

He shot upright with a yell of his own and stared at the screamer. She was about eleven, she had brown hair that reminded him of Granger and hazel eyes, she was wearing a long green nightgown, and she had a cuddly snake clutched to her chest.

He'd never seen her before in his life.

*Which begs the question, what the hell is she doing in my bed?*

“Abby!” shouted a familiar female voice from nearby. “Abby, we're coming!”

The door burst open, and two people about Draco's own age piled in, wands out and trained immediately on him.

Draco scrambled backwards, away from the threat—

And fell off the bed, landing hard on his back.

Ow.

A feminine snigger found its way into his ears, followed by a discreet cough and a little-girl giggle.

“Yeah,” Draco wheezed, catching his breath, “real funny, hilarious, now who are you—” He caught a handful of the bedcovers and pulled himself more or less upright. “—and how did you get in my house?”

“Your house?” said the pajama-clad boy, arching one brown eyebrow in a move Draco thought he'd cornered the market on. “I do believe you're a tad confused, my friend. This is Fidelus Manor, home of the Beauvoi family for forty generations.”

“Th-the what?” Draco stammered.

“And I know all of the family,” the nightgowned girl added (*she's got to be Granger, said a little voice in the back of Draco's head, apparently independent of the frozen rest of his mind, no one else has that hair, but I could have sworn her eyes were brown, not blue*). “You're not one of us. Unless a cousin of ours married a veela and didn't bother to inform us.”

Draco drew himself up, outraged. “Don't you dare say that about my blood,” he snapped. “I'm as pureblood as any wizard in Britain—”

The little girl broke down laughing, and the older boy and girl, after one incredulous glance at each other, joined her.

Draco sat down on the edge of the bed, watching them. “What,” he demanded, “is so funny?”

“You said a silly word,” the little girl said in between giggles. “You—said—pureblood!” She went off into a fresh peal of laughter.

The boy took a deep breath, shook his head hard, and sat down on the other side of the bed. “Look, mate,” he said companionably, “you're obviously lost. I don't know how you got in here without tripping any of our wards, or how you got in Abby's bed, but you didn't hurt her, right?”

“I didn't get in Abby's bed, she got in mine,” Draco retorted. “This is my room. My house.”

Then he took another look around.

The shape of the walls was the same, some of the furniture occupied the same places, but everything else about this room had changed. A grass-green carpet covered the floor where last night it had been polished wood, the ceiling sparkled with stars cunningly placed to mimic the night sky, and the walls were covered with a mural of children and animals dancing together to the playing of a hooded man with a silver pipe.

*My room never looked like this, not even when I was little...*

“I hate to put it like this,” the boy said, drawing Draco's eyes back to him, “but if you really think this is your room, you've got some serious problems.”

“Maybe not,” the older girl broke in, shooing her little sister towards the bathroom (the girl went reluctantly, backing towards the door with her eyes fixed on Draco). “May I use magic on you, please?” she asked Draco. “It won't hurt, and it should only take a moment.”

Draco nodded dumbly.

*Is she Granger after all? he wondered as he watched her wave her wand around his head. And if she is, who's he? I thought Granger was going with Weasley, but he's no one I've ever met before...*

“You have strong magical traces around you,” the girl announced, taking her wand away from Draco's left ear. “And they're not anything I'm familiar with. We'll have to get Father and Mother to look at them, and maybe Lord Albus.”

“Albus?” Draco blinked. “You mean Dumbledore?”

“A light begins to dawn,” the boy said in satisfaction. “We have preliminary communication.” He cupped a hand over his mouth. “Beauvoi to...” He stopped and took it away again. “I'm sorry, I've just realized I don't even know your name.”

“Malfoy,” Draco said icily. “Draco Malfoy.” He glared at the girl. “Stop pretending you don't know it at least, Granger. We've only been to school together for six years.”

“Granger?” The girl frowned. “How odd. That was my mother's maiden name.”

“Your mother?” *I can't be in the future, can I? No, that doesn't make sense...*

“Yes, my mother. You do know what a mother is, don't you?”

“Of course I—stop laughing at me!” Draco rounded on the boy, who had his hand over his mouth again. “What's your name then, if you think mine's so effing funny?”

The boy laid his hand over his heart. “Reynard Beauvoi, at your service,” he said, executing a sitting bow. “I believe you've already met my younger sister Abigail. May I present my twin sister Hermione.” The girl curtsied neatly.

*That settles it, she has to be Granger. No idea who he's supposed to be, but it doesn't matter right now. Try and get some sense out of them, trip them up with things they couldn't possibly not know.*

“Do either of you know a kid named Potter? About our age, skinny, glasses, black hair that looks like it's been through a windstorm and a scar right about here?” Draco tapped his forehead.

“No, we've never met Harry Potter,” Beauvoi said. “Never even heard of him.”

“Ha!” Draco was on his feet. “Then how'd you know his...” He trailed off, seeing the tell-tale shaking of Beauvoi's shoulders, the way Granger's lips twitched. “You're taking the mickey.”

“What was your first clue?” Granger asked, giggling a little through the words. “Yes, we know Harry. The Potters are actually our nearest neighbors—”

“Some of our nearest neighbors,” Beauvoi cut her off. “The Blacks live almost as close.”

Granger accepted the correction with a flip of the hand and kept talking. “Their parents and ours were good friends all through Hogwarts.”

*First Granger and Dumbledore, then Potter and Black, now Hogwarts. There are some things still the way they should be, but the rest of it is so screwed up...*

“And I'm a little worried that you think Harry has a scar on his forehead,” Granger added, frowning at him. “I was so sure you were just confused, until then.”

“I'm confused? I'm confused?” Draco stared at her for several seconds, then sat back down on the bed. “I don't even know where to start with that one. Why don't you just tell me what about my thinking Potter has a scar made you worried?”

“Well...” Beauvoi said slowly. “It could be that we've known Harry since we were too young to crawl, and he's never had a scar on his forehead.”

Draco gave the other boy the most skeptical look he could manage on short notice. “Never.”

“Never,” Granger said surely. “His head was hurt once, though—right there, where you said—” Her finger traced the familiar lightning shape on her own brow. “But that was back during the Troubles, years and years ago now. We were just babies then, barely old enough to talk, not old

enough to remember anything, and you don't look any older than we are. You couldn't have remembered that, not on your own.”

Draco was still trying to come up with a response to this which would make him sound both intelligent and sane when a shriek sounded from within the bathroom. “Mother! Father! They're coming!”

“And how do you know that, O great herald?” Beauvoi teased, crossing the room to throw the bathroom door wide.

“Mother sent her lion to tell me!” the little girl announced, leaping at her brother, who caught her and spun her around. “She said they'll be here within the hour and we're to dress for company! Friends, and lots of them!”

“Oh, wonderful!” Granger exclaimed, jumping up to embrace the two. “Did she say who was coming? No, never mind, of course she didn't, but lots of friends... that sounds like more than just the Blacks and Potters...”

“Neenie wants the Weasleys to visit,” the little girl sing-songed. “Neenie's in loooooove...”

“Hush, Abby,” Beauvoi scolded, dropping his sister to the floor. “Wait until they're both here. Then tease.”

“Oooh!” Abby laughed aloud. “Can I wear my blue silk, please, Ray, please, Neenie?”

Granger pressed her hands against her flushed cheeks. “Not for breakfast,” she said firmly. “Wear your gray linen instead.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Granger interrupted. “Or I'll tell Mother you've been naughty and shouldn't be allowed to dance at the ball.”

“Ball?” Abby's eyes widened. “What ball?”

“Yes, Hermione, what ball?” Beauvoi asked, frowning.

“You don't think Mother and Father would invite so many guests if they didn't plan to make a night of it, do you? It may not be tonight, but it won't be long, either. We'd best tell all the staff, and start getting ready ourselves. And—” Granger looked back at Draco.

“Ah, yes,” Beauvoi said, following her line of sight. “Our unexpected guest.”

“Sounds better than ‘prisoner,’ I suppose,” Draco muttered loud enough to be heard, glaring at all three of them.

Granger sniffed. “Wherever you come from, I hope I never go there,” she said. “It doesn't seem

to teach very good manners. Come on, Abby, we'll dress in my room. Echo can bring your things.”

Abby trotted to her sister's side and took her hand, then looked over at Draco. “I'm sorry I startled you,” she said politely. “I hope you find your way home soon.”

Draco nodded to her, automatically. His mind had finally finished putting together everything he had observed with everything the siblings had said and everything they hadn't, and it was now presenting him with the sort of conclusion that tended to make people scream and tear out all their hair.

*Either this is the most elaborate charade ever put on, or it's not a charade at all.*

*And if it's not a charade, then...*

*Where am I?*

Fingers snapped under his nose. “Malfoy. You in there?”

Draco jerked upright. Beauvoi was standing over him, looking down with a mixture of confusion and concern. “I don't know how you dress where you come from, but you'd better borrow some of my clothes for today. We look about the same size. That all right with you?”

“Fine.” Draco wanted to say more, a lot more, that no, it was not fine, that he wanted to go home, but somehow the monosyllable was all that would come out.

“Great. Let's get going, or the girls will beat us downstairs and hide all the toast.”

Draco got to his feet, allowing himself one last look around the familiarly strange room.

*I wanted somewhere I could start fresh. Somewhere no one knew me.*

*I should probably be more careful what I wish for.*

Shoulders hunched, he followed Beauvoi out the door.

## Be Careful 2: Who You Look At

Draco sat halfway down the long dining table, cordially ignored by the chattering siblings grouped at its head. His right hand was curled around the handle of a teacup, but he hadn't lifted it from the saucer yet. He didn't trust his hands.

*Strange people who live in my house and call it theirs. Who say it's been their family's home for forty generations. Forty generations... that's ridiculous, that's farther back than any magical family has ever been traced...*

He put both hands around the teacup, brought it to his mouth, and took a sip. The liquid inside was barely warm, but the familiar taste helped to get his mind working.

*Easy numbers. Say twenty-five years to a generation. He set the teacup back in its saucer absently. That makes four generations every century. So forty generations would be ten—*

Cold fear uncoiled down Draco's spine. He knew very well what magical bloodline had been traced back ten centuries.

*No. They can't be. They're nothing like—*

*But the little girl, Abby, she had a snake. A cuddly snake. What kind of family would give their daughter a cuddly snake to take to bed?*

His mouth was dry, the lingering taste of the tea bitter on his tongue. *Their parents are coming home soon. I have to see their father. Then I'll know.*

Thoughts of fathers led him to a long-ago memory. His own father, staring into a wineglass. Words, bitter words, which had meant nothing to a small child hiding in the corner of the library and seemed to mean hardly more now.

*“A fool for an ancestor... yes, a fool... if he hadn't been so greedy, he could have twined his blood with the greatest the world has ever seen... but no, he wanted the money and the power, what did he care about blood? Except its spilling.” A harsh laugh. “And he took the mark of shame they gave him and wore it like a badge of honor, and I carry it to this day...”*

The words were rearranging now, shifting by the moment, mingling with his thoughts and his impossible surroundings, settling into a pattern Draco refused to look at. He reached, instead, for

the certainties he'd been taught in his earliest childhood.

*I am a Malfoy. Malfoys take what we want and rise by others' fall. Malfoys bow only to those who command obedience, for that is where true power lies. Malfoys are pureblood, powerful, strong.*

But a more recent memory kept intervening.

*Last night, when I looked at myself in the mirror, I finally admitted it. I'm not strong. I never have been. The only power I've ever had came from Father, or from the Dark Lord. He pulled at the left sleeve of the robes Beauvoi had lent him, making sure the Mark on his arm was covered. And Abby acted as though being pureblood was something to laugh at...*

*Come to think of it, Granger has better magic than I've ever had. She's strong, she's fast, she's good. And she's—*

No. Draco pushed his chair back from the table and stood up, heedless of the eyes on him from its head. No. *It isn't true. It can't be true. I won't let it be true!*

“Finished?” Granger asked.

Draco pulled himself back to the moment. “Yes. I think so.” He'd only had a sip of tea, not even a piece of toast, but he didn't think he could eat anything now, not with all the fear and shock and strangeness coursing through his mind.

“Then upstairs we go,” said Beauvoi, setting aside his plate. “Ladies, if you will?” He offered his arms to his sisters, though he had to bend a bit for Abby to get hold. Three abreast, they proceeded towards the stairs, Draco following in a divided frame of mind.

*They're not even looking at me. I could run out the door. Get off our—their—lands, Apparate to London or Edinburgh or Hogsmeade—*

*And then what? Ask for the nearest reality merchant? No. Whatever's happening here, is happening here. I have to stay and find out what changed, and change it back so I can get home!*

Draco started up the stairs, looking at the carpet. If he concentrated on that, only on that, he could imagine that he was home already, headed up to his bedroom for some practice in the N.E.W.T.-level spells he wouldn't be able to learn in the seventh year he wouldn't have, or to the roof with his broomstick to go flying alone, only on the family's land and only at night...

He shook his head firmly and kept climbing. He was alive, he was free, and he was still a Malfoy. Those were the most important things in his life. Nothing else could be allowed to matter.

*Nothing except making sure our side wins.*

It would have been so much easier if he were still sure which side was his.

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When he reached the roof, the Beauvois had already separated and were peering eagerly into the distance. It was a sunny morning, bright enough that Draco had to shade his eyes, but none of them seemed to have trouble with the light.

“What's your family like, Malfoy?” Beauvoi asked without turning around. “Brothers or sisters?”

“None. I'm the only one.” Draco tried to put a quelling tone into his voice.

“Isn't that boring?” Abby asked.

*I don't think it's working.* “I wouldn't know. I've never had it any other way.”

“Oh.” Abby thought a moment. “I'm sorry.”

Draco nodded, satisfied. “Apology accepted.”

The little girl giggled. “I didn't mean that kind of sorry! I meant I was sorry you didn't have brothers and sisters!”

“Er,” Draco said.

Granger snickered, then turned her head to look at him. “Do you have parents, then?” she said. “Since you obviously disdain such lowly creatures as siblings.”

*Why don't you go sell your vocabulary and buy a few social graces?* “Yes, I have parents. Who will be worried about me, and looking for me.”

“And if they can find you here, they're good,” Beauvoi said, still with his back to Draco. “We certainly won't try to keep you. They show up, go with them and blessings on you.”

“How generous of you.”

“Yes, isn't it?” The lines of Beauvoi's shoulders seemed to indicate the smirk Draco was sure the other boy was wearing at this very moment. “I'm well known for it among my friends. A model of generosity, that's what they call me.”

“A model of pomposity, more like,” Granger cut in. “If I prick you with a pin, do you blow up from all that hot air?”

Abby giggled again, backing away, as Beauvoi pivoted slowly to face his sister. “Hermione, dearest,” he drawled. “Do you know what today is?”

“No, Reynard love, I'm afraid I don't.”

“Today...” Beauvoi took a step closer to Granger. “Today, my darling...” Another step. “Is a marvelous holiday...” A third. They were practically touching. “Known as Throw Your Sister Off the Roof Day!”

He seized her arm and flung her forward. She yelped in surprise as she vanished below the level of the roof.

Draco gaped for an instant, then dashed across the roof. "Are you insane?" he shouted, grabbing Beauvoi by the shoulders—they were exactly the same height, a free corner of his mind noted in passing. "What did you do that for?"

"You know, you're right," Beauvoi said, frowning thoughtfully. "I really ought to have done it a few minutes ago. Still, better late than never."

Draco opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again, just in time to have it shut by Abby's rising squeal. "Ooooooh, ooooooh, look! Look! Look!"

Both boys turned to look over the edge of the roof. There, sitting on a broomstick about ten feet below, were two very familiar forms, the exceptionally long one topped with red half-obscured by the brunette one Draco had seen fall not thirty seconds before.

"You know, Weasley," Beauvoi shouted down towards them, "the point of throwing one's sister off the roof is to have her actually hit the ground!"

A hand detached itself from Granger's hair, displayed one finger for a moment, then returned to its former place.

"What does that mean?" Abby asked brightly.

"Ask Mother when she gets home," Beauvoi said. "And stay close. I don't want to take any chances of—"

"Snatch!" bellowed a gleeful voice, and a black blur shot across the roof with a rush of wind that disarranged Draco's hair completely and whipped Beauvoi's robes around his legs. Abby, shrieking joyfully, vanished as the blur passed her by.

"Potter!" Beauvoi yelled after it. "Give me back my sister!"

"Not a chance!" shouted back the now-familiar voice, and the blur resolved itself several yards from the house. Abby sat sidesaddle on the broom handle of a black-haired boy with glasses, grinning cheekily at Beauvoi. His eyes, visible even at this distance in the blazing sunlight, were the green of the fields all around the house.

There was no scar on his forehead.

"You're going to go throwing perfectly good sisters off roofs, I'm going to get one while the getting is good," Harry Potter went on, patting Abby on the head proprietarily. "How about it, little love? Want to come home with me?"

"Ooh, yes!" Abby bounced up and down, making the broom wobble precariously.

“I'd think you had enough already,” Beauvoi said, crossing his arms. “Isn't your mum ever going to stop having kids?”

“You should talk—what'll this be for your family? Six?”

“Seven. We're trying to beat them out.” Beauvoi jerked a thumb down towards the still-snogging Weasley and Granger. “Mother says this is the last for her, though, so unless it's twins again we're not going to make it.”

Potter shrugged. “Your dad could always try to find someone else to have the last one.”

“Him?” Beauvoi gave a short laugh. “Not bloody likely! Speaking of which...”

A sound like a bottle being uncorked, and a second broomstick rose into easy view. “They're coming,” Ron Weasley said, brushing Granger's hair out of his face. “We flew on ahead to say hello.”

“Translation, his mum told him to get a move on and work off a few hormones before they all get here,” Potter said. “And I came with him, because Ginny's riding with your family on the big carpet, so she can talk shop with Meghan and Aunt Andy and Aunt Sissy...”

Draco took an involuntary step back at the third name. It had the secondary, highly unwanted, effect of drawing everyone's eyes to him.

“Who's this?” Weasley asked, bringing his broom in for a landing.

“We don't really know,” Granger answered. “He got into the house during the night, but he seems to be harmless. His name's Draco. Draco Malfoy.”

“Malfoy?” Potter maneuvered his broom in beside Weasley's, Abby sliding off its front to land with a small thud. “Wasn't that what they called that weird cousin of yours way back when? The one who—”

“Yes,” Beauvoi said shortly. “We'll discuss it when Father and Mother get here, if you don't mind.” He glanced outward. “Which is right now. *Clear the deck!*”

The force of the shout sent Draco backwards three steps, and the content of the conversation he'd just witnessed kept him going until he was leaning against the small shelter of the door they'd used for access onto the roof. Brickwork rough under his hands, he watched the sky fill with broomsticks and magic carpets, all the occupants calling cheerful greetings to those standing below.

The first carpet to land held a man whose face Draco had seen in the newspapers, half-mad then, sane and laughing now, but still recognizable. Sirius Black dismounted from the right side of the thickly woven rug, then lifted down a dark-skinned girl a year or two younger than Abby, to whose side she immediately ran when set on her feet. Two similarly-complected boys, a fourth and a first year by Draco's estimation, scrambled off without any help, as did the sturdy woman who

must be their mother, and Black snapped his fingers at the carpet, which promptly dropped to the surface of the roof.

*Has an awful lot of kids for a dead man, hasn't he?*

The next carpet in was being steered by a capable-looking woman with a round, familiar face, as the dark-blond man beside her seemed totally lost in thought. Behind them, chatting animatedly, sat two people whom Draco knew perfectly well, or at least he thought he did.

*Longbottom and Lovegood, and what looks like her dad and his mum—but she's supposed to be crazy, locked up in St. Mungo's, and I know he's crazy, he puts out that Quibbler thing...*

He snorted to himself. *Sounds like a perfect match.*

Longbottom slid off the carpet and helped his mother down, and Beauvoi was at its other side in a heartbeat, holding out his hand to Lovegood. She smiled and took it. Draco couldn't repress a shudder.

*Who in their right mind would want a bug-eyed Ravenclaw for a girlfriend?*

*Of course, this is a bloke who shoved his own sister off the roof and trusted Ron Weasley to catch her. I think we can rule out his being in his right mind.*

A flotilla of broomsticks landed next, seven in all, each carrying a familiar redhead, most of whom were whooping or shouting to the people below. The roof was starting to get crowded, and Draco was catching curious looks directed his way. He kept his gaze on the new arrivals, looking quickly away if anyone tried to make eye contact. His memories of the elder Weasleys were not pleasant ones.

There were only two carpets left in the sky, and one swooped in to hover over the others now. Its pilot could easily have been Potter under Aging Potion, and the woman beside him had hair befitting a Weasley and the eyes Draco could never stare down, not even from the other end of the Quidditch pitch. A red-haired girl who looked like a fifth year and a pair of black-haired boys, one about ten and the other six, clambered off, and the girl turned back to scoop up a toddler who could have been mistaken for her daughter.

*If they were Muggles. If they did the crazy things Muggles do. Which they might. I don't know.* Draco leaned his head back against the brick wall as a wave of dizziness washed over him. The noise, the bright sun, and the constant fear at his core were starting to affect him. *All right. Here comes the last one.*

*Now I see if I was right or not.*

This carpet was discernibly bigger than the others, and definitely more heavily laden. A boy in his mid-teens sat in the center, a small brother cuddled beside him and a smaller sister on his lap sucking her thumb. All had the same brown-on-brown look as Beauvoi and Abby and Granger.

*And I suppose she's not really Granger at all, is she? She said it was her mother's maiden name, though...*

The woman sitting at the front of the carpet bore that out. Hair, eyes, smile, “I know a million useless things and I'm going to share them all with you” attitude, everything about her shouted Granger to Draco's eyes. Everything, perhaps, except her obviously pregnant belly.

*Even Granger's not quite that much of a slut. Not yet.*

Finally, Draco turned his head enough to see the man who had flown the carpet, now helping the woman to the ground. All he could see at the moment was a back, but that was enough to start with. Sandy-brown hair streaked with white, a confident carriage, narrow shoulders but strong—

The man put an arm around his wife and turned to face his friends, and Draco blanched, another wave of dizziness assaulting him.

*Not quite what I was afraid of. But not much better, either.*

*And it sure as hell doesn't make sense!*

“Welcome, everyone, to our humble abode,” said the voice of the man who looked like, but was obviously not, Professor Remus Lupin. “Shall we go down?”

Laughter and affirmative answers rippled through the crowd on the roof. Draco shrank away from the sound. People were starting to turn towards the door, any second they'd see him and want to know who he was, he had to hide—

Movement near the back of the carpet drew his attention before he could move himself. Ginny Weasley was climbing down, followed by a girl who had the look of the Black children but was at least as old as Potter or Draco himself, and then—

He took a step forward without meaning to. “Aunt Bella?” he whispered. “Mother?”

He had just time to see the shock and incomprehension on the two women's faces before the world spun around him and went black.

## Be Careful 3: What You Admit To

“Great Merlin—” Andrea Tonks darted forward and caught the strange boy as he collapsed. “Who in the world is this?”

“I wish I knew,” Reynard said from behind her. “He just appeared in the house this morning. Claimed it was his house and we were trespassing.”

“He says his name is Draco,” Hermione added. “He's a little rude, but I think most of that is because he's afraid.”

Andy looked back at her sister. “Did he call one of us ‘Aunt Bella’?” she asked.

“I believe he did.” Cecilia Black came forward, kneeling beside Andy and laying a hand on the boy's cheek. “And since the last time I looked, I bear no resemblance to our late and unlamented sister...”

Andy let her own hand run down the boy's bare right arm and scowled. “You can sort that out at your leisure. Remus, don't you teach your children to feed their guests? This boy hasn't had anything to eat for nearly a full day!”

The patriarch of the Beauvois raised an eyebrow at his oldest son and daughter, who both flushed. “I'm sure we'll discuss it at some point soon,” he said. “In the meantime, what will you need?”

“A quiet place to work,” Cecy said immediately. “A house-elf to fetch supplies. And Meghan and Susanna, if we may borrow them?” She half-turned, addressing this last to the girls' mother.

Aletha Black smiled. “I assume that wasn't a serious question,” she said, shooing her daughters forward. “And don't you dare,” she added to her husband.

He pouted. “You're no fun.”

“You've been saying that for twenty-five years,” James Potter pointed out.

“It's still true!”

“All right, everyone quiet down,” called Remus' wife, her voice rising above the tumult of chatter. “I'm sure Reynard and Hermione and Abigail will be very happy to tell us what they

know about our... unexpected guest.” Her eyes flickered over the three named children. All of them, Andy noticed, looked a bit worried at their mother's use of their full first names—as well they might; Gertrude Beauvoi seldom deserved the nickname by which she was universally known, but when she did deserve it, she did so with a vengeance.

*Enough woolgathering, Andy. This boy needs care, and you won't give it to him by sitting here thinking about your friends.*

She got to her feet and conjured a stretcher under the strange boy, making her wand motions a bit bigger than usual for the benefit of Meghan and Susie, both watching eagerly. Molly and Alice shooed people back from the stairs with the finesse of trained sheepdogs, and Cecy opened the door with a wave of her wand. “Where would be best, Remus?” she asked, looking up at him.

“The blue guest room on the second floor,” Remus said after a moment's thought. “Abby can show you where it is.”

Abby brightened and ran to Susie, and the two girls vanished into the stairwell hand-in-hand. Meghan followed, her practiced older-sister look of strained tolerance firmly in place, and Andy and Cecy brought up the rear, the blond boy lying still and pale between them.

*Strange, so strange, what I'm feeling from him. Andy laid her free hand once more on a white-skinned wrist and let her magic work. We share blood, I'd be ready to swear on that, but from where? How much? And who in Merlin's name can he be?*

She looked over the stretcher at her fine-boned, blonde sister, walking with head held high and lips tightly pressed together, then down at the boy again. Presented with only the two, an impartial observer would have concluded that it was possible they were related, entirely possible they were exactly what the boy had called them.

Andy was far from impartial.

*He can't possibly know how much that hurt her to hear, with all the troubles she's had. Though I doubt he meant to hurt anyone. He's starving and exhausted, he's been through several nasty shocks very recently—what they are and how he'll handle them is Cecy's business, but what they've done to his body is mine—and his magic has itself in a knot in his left forearm for reasons I can't wait to discover.*

She smiled to herself and increased her pace. Whatever else she might be or do, Andrea Tonks was a Healer who truly loved her work.

It was, after all, in her blood.

---

He drifted, halfway between waking and sleep, hearing words without listening, feeling rather than seeing shadows which fell across his closed eyelids. Four voices speaking around him, about him. All were female. All were calm, soothing to his ears. Occasionally a hand touched him.

Cool, soft skin against his own. Nothing to fear. Nothing to hide.

Draco opened his eyes.

“Hello,” said the girl standing in front of him. She was about his own age and wore her dark hair in small beaded braids. Her eyes stood out brightly even in this dim room, incongruously silver-gray in her brown-sugar face. “Are you feeling better?”

“I... think so.” Draco flinched inwardly at how weak his voice sounded. “What happened?”

“When was the last time you had anything to eat?” asked a woman's firm voice from behind him. “No, don't answer that, I'll tell you. Yesterday, well before noon, that's when.” Her footsteps marked her passage around the bottom of the bed. “And you barely had anything to drink between then and now either, did you?”

“I don't remember,” Draco began, then saw the woman's face and broke off, eyes widening.

The woman smiled ruefully. “Please, forgive my atrocious manners.” She shooed the girl back from the bed and took her place, going to one knee beside the bed, bringing her face into close proximity with Draco's. “It's just that I suspect you've been doing this to yourself for quite some time, and I'm none too happy with the results. How are you feeling now?”

“Better. Some.” The words came out automatically, most of Draco's mind being busy categorizing the differences between this woman and his aunt. *Brown hair, not black. Fewer wrinkles. And let's not forget she looks sane. Why was I so stupid?*

“I should hope so, after what we've been up to.” The woman touched his wrist and nodded in satisfaction. “You're not ill, not yet, but you are very worn down. You need rest and good food and not to worry yourself for a week at the very least, or this will happen again. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. I think so.” Over the woman's shoulder, he could see the girl standing by the wall, her hand on the shoulder of a smaller version of herself, and there was at least one other person in the room if the soft breathing behind him meant anything. “Who are you?”

The woman laughed. “Once again, manners. I do apologize. I'm Healer Andrea Tonks, Andy for short, and the young ladies behind me are Meghan and Susanna Black, my cousins and informal apprentices. Meghan will be a true apprentice next year, after she's finished school, and I'm sure Susanna will do the same when it's time. And my sister, Healer Cecilia Black, is about to come around where you can see her and say hello to you.” She lifted her head. “Aren't you, Cecy dear?”

*Andrea, Cecilia—I thought Potter said something about his Aunt Andy and Aunt Sissy, but I could have heard him wrong, he could have said Cecy instead—Mother has a sister Andromeda, they used to call her Andy, and she married a Tonks, it was her daughter who married Lupin—*

Another woman stepped hesitantly into Draco's field of view, looking at him with worry verging

on fear. His thoughts shattered at the sight.

“Andy, take the girls downstairs,” Cecilia Black said quietly. “You had best go enjoy yourselves. I will be here for some time.”

Feet pattered and thumped across the floor, a door opened and closed, but Draco saw nothing but the woman in front of him. She returned his regard with equal intensity, seeming to search his face for something. After a few seconds, a flicker of emotion passed through her eyes, too quickly for him to identify. A moment later, she was smiling, masking any true feelings under a Healer's professional manner.

“Do you feel well enough to sit up?” she asked.

“I don't know.” Draco experimented, pushing against the mattress with one arm. His elbow wobbled a bit, but held, and he pulled himself into a semi-sitting position with his back to the headboard of the bed. “I guess I do.”

He remembered vaguely, as though from another life, a time when he would have been angry and ashamed to be seen so vulnerable, and would have sworn or made snide remarks at anyone who dared to help him. Now...

*Being angry takes strength, and I don't have any to spare. And I'm just too pathetically glad that someone gives a twig about me to be ashamed of it.*

He hadn't meant to think it quite that bluntly, but there it was. He'd put it into words and there was no way to take it back. The only people in his entire world who cared about him at all were his parents, and they were too busy trying to keep themselves alive to do anything for him except keep him the same way.

“What are you thinking?” the soft voice broke in.

Draco looked up and met pale blue eyes. How could he know where the similarities ended and differences began? “It's... complicated.”

The Healer smiled. “I am a good listener.”

“I wouldn't even know where to start.”

“Start with yourself.” She reached out and touched the back of his hand, her fingers cool against his skin for a moment before she withdrew. “Most people enjoy talking about that subject.”

“People enjoy talking about me? Well, I'm not surprised.” Draco posed for a moment, but his heart wasn't in it, even when he heard the Healer chuckle and knew she wasn't faking. “I don't really know what you want me to say,” he admitted.

“Start with your name and your birthday. Then your family. If you can't think of anything after those, I can keep making suggestions.”

“All right.” Draco punched the pillow behind him into a more supporting shape and began. “My name is Draco Malfoy, and I was born on the fifth of June, 1980...”

What felt like several hours later, he finally ran out of things to say. The Healer had poured him a cup of water from a pitcher on the bedside table partway through his reminiscences about his childhood, and he had drained it and two others in the course of talking. She had a cup of her own, from which she had sipped quietly as she listened.

*She was right. She's a good listener.*

“How do you feel now?” she asked when he had been silent for several moments.

Draco spun the empty water cup between his hands. “Tired.”

“Not surprising.” The Healer tapped a finger on her own cup. “You have drained yourself more than you knew, Draco.”

A flash of anger shot through Draco. “Oh, so fainting in front of just about bloody everybody wasn't enough to tell me that?”

“You fainted because of physical weakness. Because you had not eaten in too long.”

“That wasn't the only reason,” Draco said, almost without thinking.

“No?” The Healer collected the cup from his lax hands. “Tell me the other one, then.”

“It's stupid.”

“I promise not to laugh.”

Draco squirmed, looking away. “You look like my mother,” he said under his breath. “And your sister looks like one of my aunts. A lot of people here look like people I know at home—a lot of them even have the same names—but...”

“But this isn't your home,” that calm voice finished for him. “You fell asleep in your own bed, and awakened in a strange one, and nothing makes sense.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to go home?”

*Yes, yes, of course I want to go home, what kind of stupid question is that? Why would I want to stay here? I don't understand this place, no one acts the way I expect them to, my family doesn't even exist...*

“I don't know.”

It took him five seconds to realize the voice was his own.

“Will you let me help you?” The bed dipped from the weight of someone sitting on it. “Help you decide, and then help you carry through with your decision?”

“I don't need help,” Draco muttered. “I'm seventeen, I'm adult, I can take care of myself.”

“Can you?”

The question hung in the air between them. Draco's chest felt tight, as though he were trying to breathe too deeply, and his throat tensed until swallowing hurt like a knife.

“I should tell you what I did while you were unconscious,” Healer Black said into the silence. “There is Healing magic in my family. Going back a thousand years, to Lady Ravenclaw herself.”

Draco jerked his head around to stare at her. “Ravenclaw? You're—”

“An Heir of hers, yes. As is Andy, as is our cousin Sirius, though his power works differently than ours.” Pale eyes darkened. “As was our eldest sister Isabelle, but her Healing turned to hurting when she decided evil held more potential than good.”

*Isabelle—and what's the betting they always called her Bella?*

“With this power, I can know a great deal about you just by touching you, my skin to yours.” Healer Black held out her hands and regarded them. “My specialty in everyday Healing is the mind and the emotions, so my magic has become focused on those aspects of a person rather than their physical body.”

Draco stiffened in shock and outrage. “You read my mind? When I didn't even know about it? That's—”

“Hear me out, Draco,” Healer Black interrupted calmly. “I did not read your mind. I brushed its surface. I learned what you were feeling, but not why. I learned the general trend of your thoughts, not their specific content. Anyone who spent time with you, talking and listening to what you have to say, could do something similar. My magic allows me to do it more quickly and more easily, and to be more sure of the results.”

Draco slumped back against the pillow. “So tell me,” he said with all the sarcasm he could muster. “What am I feeling these days?”

“Pain.” The Healer's voice was matter-of-fact. “Pain and fear and hopelessness, a desperate longing for an escape from a life turned into torture. I also sensed a recent occurrence which uprooted everything you believed about yourself and turned it on its head. Something which made you look into a mirror and truly see the person who looks back, and wish he were not the way he is.” Her eyes met his and held them. “Tell me I lie.”

Sudden memory surged over Draco. Kneeling before the Dark Lord, staring into hypnotic red eyes

—snake-dry hands within his mind, ruthlessly drawing forth every shame and failure, dwelling especially on the ones caused by Harry Potter or his followers, finishing with the fiasco on the Astronomy Tower—groveling afterwards, begging for his life, for his parents' lives, hearing the laughter of the Death Eaters around him, and feeling seventeen years of pride crumble into dust, leaving nothing but a vast emptiness within.

He had cried, there at the Dark Lord's feet, sobs of terror and pain tearing free one after another, shattering the person he had believed he was. Draco Malfoy should never have cried. He should never have needed to cry. He should have been on his feet, proud and strong, victorious. But no amount of “should have” changed the reality of knees, humiliation, weakness. Defeat.

He was crying again now, but this time was different. This time, arms held him close, a hand stroked his hair. “Let it out,” a voice whispered, “let it out... no one will ever know but you and I, and I will never tell...”

“I don't know who I am,” he whispered back, shaking with the admission as much as with the tears. “I'm not who I thought I was, and I don't know who I am.”

A moment of silence. Another. Another. Then—

“You are my son.” Arms tightened, released. “If you wish to be.”

## Be Careful 4: Where You Count To

Draco pulled back, startled. “What?”

“You called me Mother.” The known-unknown woman smiled half-hesitantly at him. “I have never married. The one man I thought I could learn to love has loved another for longer than he can recall. I have filled my life with my work, and my other family, and I am happy. But you...” She reached out a hand and cupped his face. “You are alone, and I know what it is to be alone. In the darkness of the night, in a silent afternoon, even in a room filled with other people.” Her thumb wiped a tear from his cheek. “Let us no longer be lonely. Let what you called me be the truth.”

Draco clenched his teeth as two powerful, opposing tides rose within him. *Melodramatic woman, sneered one. And you—pitiful, disgusting, needy little brat that you are—do you really think she'll want you around after she gets to know you?*

*She has no reason to lie, whispered the other. Look at her face! She wants this as much as you do. And you do want it, you know you do...*

*You can want anything! howled the first voice. That doesn't make it good for you!*

*This is what you need, the second voice countered. What you have always needed and never had.*

*It is a trick! A trap! A tempest of fury raged through the words*

*No. It is the truth. Calm, reasonable, quiet, serene.*

Draco made his choice in that instant, and chose as he had always chosen. The side of strength, as he perceived it, over that of weakness.

He flung his arms around his mother and held her close, as a lifetime's worth of tears threatened to wash him away.

She gathered him in and rocked him, back and forth, murmuring love to him. It wasn't until he felt a tear fall on the back of his neck that he realized she was crying too, and began to understand what she had risked in making him the offer. If he had said no—worse, laughed at her, scorned her—

*I didn't. Let it go at that.*

At last they lay side by side on the bed, his face still pressed against her shoulder, her arms over and around him. Sleep wanted him, he knew, it wanted to come and claim him, but he didn't want to sleep. He wanted to stay here forever, safe in his mother's embrace, in the new world he'd discovered, where nothing could hurt him ever again...

Against his will, his eyes closed, and he knew nothing more.

---

Narcissa Malfoy hurried down the corridor, lit wand in her hand. She had gone to wake her son when he hadn't come to breakfast, but the only sign of Draco in his room had been a crumpled set of robes near the bathroom door and the upset bedcovers. He had been there, that much was obvious.

*But where is he now?*

Rather than worry Lucius, she was investigating the upper floors of the house on her own. It was possible he'd been unable to fall asleep last night after—that (even her mind, inured as it was, shied away from what she'd seen), that he'd taken a book or some other amusement into one of the unused rooms so that no one would disturb him, that he'd lost track of time or fallen asleep there instead—

And as she thought it, she opened a door, and there he was. Fully dressed, lying on his side, asleep on a dusty bed. Tear tracks stained his face, making him look absurdly young, eleven instead of seventeen, and she wished once again that there were something she could do, some shield she could raise between him and the pain of the world.

*Enough. There is none. He is a man now, and must act like one. The times, and our position, demand it.*

She leaned over him and shook his shoulder to wake him.

---

Draco roused, and took a moment to luxuriate in the comfort of the bed without opening his eyes. He hated waking up quickly, rushing out of the settled comfort of sleep into the worries of the day. With a war going on, though, slow waking was a luxury, and one he hadn't been able to afford for a long time.

*When I could sleep at all.*

But it was over now, all over. There was no war here, nothing but some vague “troubles” far in the past, no reason to lose sleep or throw oneself out of it suddenly. He would have to ask Healer Black—*Mother*, he corrected himself, and smiled at the thought—what the “troubles” had been like, who they had been against and how they had ended, but that could wait—

“Draco!” The hiss was familiar, as was the second, more urgent shake. “Draco, get up!”

“Mother?” Startled, suddenly worried, Draco opened his eyes. “What's—”

The word died on his tongue as he saw the woman before him.

*Oh, yes, Mother, a voice in the back of his mind mocked. That she certainly is. But not the one you were expecting, is she?*

“What are you doing up here?” Narcissa Malfoy asked, looking around the small and dusty room. “Why did you get dressed, but not come to breakfast?”

“I—” Draco sat up, fighting his face into some semblance of bewildered normality. “I don't know. I don't remember coming up here. I took my robes off and went to bed, and then—”

“Sleepwalking.” Narcissa shook her head. “I'm not surprised. Not with last night.” An awkward hand on his shoulder, quickly withdrawn. “Come to breakfast. You must be hungry.”

“I'll be down in a moment, Mother. Thank you for coming.” Polite words, meaningless words, but they made her smile and hurry out of the room and shut the door behind her, and that was all he wanted.

Draco flopped back down on the bed, buried his face in one of the dusty pillows, and snarled three of the worst curses he knew. Then he yanked at both ends of the pillow, for good measure. The fabric tore slightly at the top of the case, and a feather or two floated free.

*Sleepwalking. That makes it all make sense, doesn't it? I got up, put on a fresh set of robes, and came up here to lie down again. Possibly making a few other stops along the way, if I was acting out my whole dream.*

His cheeks burned with shame. *Such a pretty, perfect place you dreamed up, Draco. Would it have been impossible to show a little common sense? To remember that perfect places don't exist? That anything that good, that happy, can't be real?*

*Poor little baby*, the inward voice taunted. *Dreamed he'd flown to the moon, and woke up crying for the stars.*

Angrily, he swiped a hand across his eyes, smearing dust and tears together on his cheeks. He'd have to stop and wash his face before presenting himself at the breakfast table.

*I could have been happy there. I know I could.*

*And that's what should have told me it was just a dream.*

Shoving the thoughts away, Draco stood up and walked towards the door. Before he opened it, though, he took another look around the room. Small it was, dusty it might be, but it was a place he could have been—no, a place he had been happy.

*Dream or no dream, that feeling was real.*

He'd start moving his things after breakfast.

---

Draco distracted himself as he worked with thoughts about the dream-world he'd left behind.

*Aunt Andy and Mo—no, Healer Tonks and Healer Black—they were Heirs of Ravenclaw, M—Healer Black said so herself. I wonder if there are Heirs of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor too? And who are the Heirs of Slytherin, or are there any if there's not—him?* He cast a look towards the door, towards the stairs, towards the Dark Lord whose Mark he still carried on his arm and in his magic.

*None of them said anything about the Mark. I'm not sure they even noticed it. Or if they did, maybe they just thought it was a tattoo.* He snickered. *“What, this? No, I'm not the evil follower of a Dark wizard, I'm just your typical rebellious teenager. Nothing to see here, move along.”*

Taking his own advice, he levitated the first wandload of books up the stairs, a bag of clothing slung over his shoulder. For all his family's money, he'd never managed to accumulate too many things—or maybe that was just the effect of living out of a trunk for the past six years.

*Whatever it is, it's making my life easier now. Huzzah.*

He dropped his load just inside the door and went back for the next.

His father was standing outside the door of his bedroom, looking bemusedly at the chaos within.

“Sir,” Draco acknowledged, stopping short of the door. A sudden, impossible urge to laugh struck him as he recalled who, in the other world, had been the master of the house.

*Father'd come over apoplectic if I told him. And then find something sharp and silver and go out hunting...*

The recollection of another sudden terrified death quashed the laughter effectively, and Draco looked up and met the eyes so like his own. “Did you need me, Father?” he asked.

“Not particularly. I was curious to see what you were busying yourself with, is all.” Lucius turned to regard the room once more. “Do you no longer care for your room?”

“There's nothing wrong with it...” Draco hesitated, trying to find the right words to explain without immediately labeling himself as insane.

Lucius frowned. “Why, then, the move? You have slept in this room since you were a baby.”

Draco grabbed at the word thankfully. “That's exactly why, Father. Because I'm not a baby. Not anymore. I'm of age now. I should act like it.”

“Ah, I see.” The eyes gained a trace of—was that approval? “So you hope, by changing your surroundings, to give yourself a constant reminder of your new status.”

“Yes. That's it.” Draco let a smile get onto his face. “Not quite the way I'd have put it, but... yes. That's what I'm doing.”

Lucius laughed aloud, and the hand he laid on Draco's shoulder was fatherly in the extreme. “It does not matter to me how you put it, so long as you know what you are doing, my son. I have been worried about you. It is good to see you starting to find your feet again.” He squeezed Draco's arm. “Make me proud.”

“That's all I've ever wanted, Father,” Draco said, shutting his eyes for a split second to hide the lie.

*All I've ever wanted—until now.*

“Then we will do very well together as men,” Lucius said, squeezing tighter for a moment, then releasing his grip. “Very well indeed.”

Draco watched his father down the hall and around the corner before he returned to his work.

*Talk about ironic. I try all my life to do what he wants, to be what he is, and I fall and fail and never get anywhere. One night, one dream, about things he wouldn't touch with three of his canes put together, and suddenly he thinks I'm worth noticing again...*

He swallowed against the pain that thinking of his dream world had brought him. *He's willing to be my father again. That's all that matters. And Mother—*

A sharp shake of the head as Cecilia Black's face tried to interpose itself on Narcissa Malfoy's. *No more dreams. Dreams are nice, but life is what matters.*

*And right now, life consists of moving everything I own from one floor of this house to another.*

Throwing another bag of clothes over his left shoulder, Draco pointed his wand at the second pile of books. “Wingardium Leviosa.”

Fifteen minutes, three more Levitating Charms, and a lot of sweat later, he stood in the doorway of his new room, his belongings at his feet, looking around.

*Maybe I should have cleaned first.*

*Oh well. I'll know for next time.*

*If there is a next time.*

He lifted his wand again and concentrated his mind on the task at hand. Domestic spells or not, this was a job for a skilled wizard.

“Evanesco!” The dust was gone.

“Scourgify!” Floor and walls gleamed as though freshly polished.

“Alohomora!” The window sprang open, and a brisk summer breeze flirted the curtains.

“Revisere!” The bedlinens lost their mustiness, and the pillow he'd torn mended itself, a last feather tucking into the pillowcase with apologetic haste.

*Ha.* Draco lowered his wand, a triumphant smile on his lips. *Beat that, Granger.*

The books were quickly arranged on the shelves built against one wall, the mementos and pictures with them or hung up around the room. His schoolbooks went on a corner of the desk—even if he couldn't return to Hogwarts, he could still study—and his quills and ink and parchment in the drawers. Underclothes, socks, shirts, trousers flew from the bags into the bureau.

Finally, Draco unlatched the large wardrobe, then turned to the bag holding his robes. “Accio.” It scooted across the floor to him, and he pulled it open and dragged out a handful of black. He would hang them all up first, and then do a mass Cleaning Charm and Anti-Wrinkle Spell on them, to save time.

*Three sets of work robes, the letter always says, but who stays with three? Most of us end up with at least five, and I've always had seven, just in case of accidents. Can't be too careful about how you look.*

Draco hung the seventh robe from its hook and stepped back, preparing to cast his spell.

Then he stopped.

*Seven robes. I hung up seven robes.*

*But I'm—*

He bit his lip, deliberately cutting off that thought. There was still work to be done. He aimed his wand and cast.

But deep in his heart, a seed began to sprout. A seed of excitement, of anticipation, even, perhaps, of hope.

---

Late that night, Draco lay in his new bed and stared at the pale outline of the window.

The thought tried to return. This time, he let it.

*I only own seven robes. And there are seven robes hanging in that wardrobe.*

*But I'm wearing robes right now. I have been all day.*

*Where did they come from?*

He shut his eyes, trying to summon sleep, but sleep didn't want to come this time. His mind was too busy, too filled with ideas and wonderings, and sleep kept a wary distance. He tossed, turned, punched his pillow into shape what felt like a hundred times, and sleep still refused to arrive.

Finally, Draco sighed, climbed out from under the covers, and curled into an approximation of the position he remembered from the morning. "There," he muttered to sleep. "Happy now?"

It would seem, from the rapidity of sleep's arrival, that sleep was very happy indeed.

---

"Come on, sleepyhead, wake up," teased a gentle voice in his ear, and the arm around him tightened in a momentary hug. "We'll be late to dinner if you don't..."

Draco didn't even bother to open his eyes. He knew.

One tear escaped his left eye. A second later, one followed from his right.

"Crying again?" A cloth whisked across his cheeks. "That's enough of that, now. You're at the perfect number already."

"Perfect number?"

"Two is just right for you today." A hand across his hair, half a caress, half a motherly straightening. "Two for joy." Lips against his cheekbone. "My joy. But my sorrow if you won't get out of bed at five o'clock in the afternoon!"

Draco opened his eyes and smiled at Healer Black—

*No, at my mother. My mum.*

*Dream or no dream, she's mine now.*

"One for sorrow," he recited, "two for joy."

"That's right." Her smile in return sent warmth shooting straight down to his toes. "Do you know the rest?"

"Three for a girl and four for a boy," Draco said, sitting up. "And I know the next lines are about money, or treasure, but I can never remember them."

"Five for silver, six for gold," Mum reminded him. "And seven—"

"For a secret," Draco finished. "Never told. But I don't have any secrets. Except that I'm hungry."

“I believe I may have a cure for that.” Mum stood up and held out her hands, drawing him to his feet beside her. “Come with me. It's time to meet your family.”

*My family.* Draco repeated the words to himself, marveling in their sound, even in silence. *My family.*

---

Unseen on the pillow, five small round spots of wetness gleamed where Draco's face had been. Two of them dried quickly in the breeze from the open window, then two more. But the last one stubbornly refused to fade.

Fate was not finished with Draco Malfoy just yet.

## Be Careful 5: What You Believe In

The small dining room, located at the rear of the manor house, seated twelve. It was neither as ornate nor as well-appointed as the main dining room. Draco could remember laughing in his sleeve at guests who had thought they were going to dine with his family and had, instead, been fobbed off with this imitation luxury.

But that was in the real world, at Malfoy Manor, and he wasn't going to think about that. Not when there was a world of his own making, all around him and ready for the exploring.

*This might be just a dream, but that means I don't have to worry about what people will think or whether or not I'm behaving as befits a Malfoy. I can just do what I want to. Like slurp when I eat soup, or throw a slice of bread at the prat across the table who won't stop showing off how he can belch on command.*

Draco grinned to himself. *Bread bouncing off Weasley's forehead: good. Everyone laughing at the expression on his face: better. Him picking it out of his soup and stuffing the whole thing in his mouth: priceless.*

He wouldn't have expected a dream world of his own creation to be populated with recognizable versions of his enemies, but there was a perverse logic to it. They all loathed him in the real world? Fine, let them. They would love him here, and treat him exactly as they would treat one of their own, and none of them ever had to know it.

*Besides, I never thought I'd say this, but they're fun to be around.* Draco let his eyes travel once around the table. His mum had left quietly once the meal was underway, so there were only eight other people present: Lovegood, the Beauvoi twins, the two youngest Weasleys, Potter, Longbottom, and Meghan Black, who was just finishing a story about the older of her brothers.

*And they have really good food. Which has been lacking at home lately.*

“What is this?” he asked, mopping out his soup bowl with another piece of bread. His mother would have been horrified. He didn't care. “It's the ugliest green I ever saw, but it's wonderful.”

“Ham and split pea,” Granger—*no, Hermione, I have to remember that*—said from farther up the table. “It takes all day to make, and the kitchen smells heavenly.”

“We filled a kitchen cabinet with it once,” Beauvoi—Ray—said reminiscently.

Draco tried to imagine this and failed. “How?”

“We drilled a hole near the top of the door,” said Hermione, twisting her finger in midair, “and I slid my wand through. Then Ray did a Transference Spell on the soup from the night before, and specified my wand as the ending point.” She spread her hands. “Voila. One cabinet full of soup.”

Ray grimaced. “We weren't expecting Father to be the one to find it, though. That was messy.”

“What was?” inquired Neville Longbottom from the other side of the table. “The soup, or what he did to you for setting it up?”

“Oh, he wasn't too angry.” Hermione giggled. “He sent Dobby to find us and bring us to the kitchen so we could see him all green and dripping.”

“Said if we could do that advanced of magic in our second year, then we deserved to have our fun.” Ray was grinning. “He made us clean it all up, but it was worth it.”

Draco swallowed a last bite of bread. “I think I like your father.”

“How nice,” Ray said blandly. “We like him too.”

“I'm so glad. Things would be difficult at home otherwise.”

Hermione groaned. “One was enough,” she said to the ceiling. “One was really, truly enough.”

“One what?” Harry Potter asked, studiously innocent.

“One person around with this sense of humor!”

Ray and Draco both sat a bit straighter in their chairs. “My dear sister,” Ray began, in an offended tone.

“It's not humor,” Draco continued, looking down his nose at her—*not hard, considering all the practice I've had*. “Not in the least.”

Ray straightened his back a trifle more. “It happens to be called wit.”

Draco followed suit, lifting his head still higher. “And it is the mark of a highly advanced mind.”

“Lesser minds try to reach this pinnacle and fail.” Ray sneered the final word, drawing it out.

“They sit below and scoff.” Draco hissed the final “f” through his teeth. “This is, of course, how we know them to be—”

“All right!” Ginny Weasley shouted, holding up her hands. “I get this enough at home—*knock it*

*off!*”

The round of laughter which swept the room was everything Draco could have wished for.

---

“So,” Remus Beauvoi said, turning away from the window to face the room. “I assume you've asked us here to discuss our latest addition, Cecy?”

“Insightful as usual, Remus.” Cecilia smiled at him, a bit wanly. “Nothing here goes farther than this room, of course. As if I needed to tell any of you that.”

“We're listening,” Molly Weasley said, settling herself more firmly into her chair beside her husband. “Who in the world is he?”

“No one in the world. Not in our world.” Cecy flattened her hands on her knees. “He believes himself in a dream while he is here. His own world, the only one he thinks is true, is far from here.”

“But he is truly here,” Danger said, her tone that of a woman wishing to clarify a point. “Not dreaming.”

“Unless a dream has form and substance, he's here,” Andy put in. “I touched him, I Healed him. He's real, and he's here.”

“And I watched him disappear as he slept,” Cecy continued. “He travels between worlds when he reaches the dream-state of his sleep, but his traveling is no dream.” She rose abruptly. “But I wish him to continue to think it is.”

“Why?” asked Alice Lovegood, her hand in her husband Gerald's. “I could understand simply not telling him if it doesn't come up, but it sounds as though you're advocating actively lying to him.”

“If necessary, yes.” Cecy paced restlessly to the end of the room and halfway back, stopping as she neared Sirius. He rose and embraced her without being asked, and she smiled thanks before starting on her way again.

“I think I may understand,” James Potter said, one hand slowly twisting a piece of his robe. “If he thinks this is a dream, then... he'll be more free with us, more open, less guarded?”

“Yes.” Cecy reached her chair again, but did not sit, instead slowly circling it.

“It seems praiseworthy enough,” Lily said doubtfully from her perch on the arm of James' chair, “but lying to him...”

“Think what he must accept while he is here,” Cecy broke in. “That the only home he has ever known is not his. That his family, an old family as his world reckons things, does not exist. That people with the faces and names of his enemies can be his friends, or at the very least not actively

hostile towards him. In a dream world, this can be so without need for explanation. He can rest and heal. If he accepts our world as real, he will have to struggle with our realities and his own at the same time, and he is not strong enough for that.”

“Why not?” Aletha asked, her tone slightly hostile. “He seems healthy. Young, intelligent, though with that strange fascination about blood...”

“He knows nothing about our Troubles.” Cecy stopped once more, staring at a blank space on the wall. “Though the war he has come from has their same flavor to it—fools using ‘blood purity’ to cover their desire for blood, pure and simple. That boy is trapped on the wrong side of that war, as much a casualty as anyone who has died or bled in it. His soul is wounded more deeply than I believed possible for sanity to remain in him. And there is one stain on it, and on his magic, that we cannot remove.” She waved a hand at Andy. “It seems he serves, or served, the leader of the evil ones in that war, and is marked with that one's symbol.”

“What symbol is that?” Remus asked.

“A skull.” Cecy turned to face him. “With a snake emerging from its jaw.”

Remus went still. “My unhallowed ancestors,” he murmured.

Cecy half-smiled. “I believe so.”

“The magic on that marking is unmistakably Dark,” Andy said, taking up the thread of the conversation. “Draco's own magic has gathered around it, trying to keep it away from his core, but it's starting to bleed through. If it can't be removed, I estimate he has at best a year before the effects overtake him.”

“What sort of effects are we talking about here?” Danger asked. “Physical, mental, magical, all three?”

“I doubt physical,” Andy said. “And I'm not qualified to diagnose mental. But magical... his own magic will be touched by Dark magic at all points, and any brush with Dark magic has bad effects. What will a constant spreading stain do?”

“It will destroy him,” said Cecy quietly. “He will find thoughts constantly in his mind about darkness and pain and corruption, and the only way to escape them will be to allow them to be enacted. And when they have escaped, others and stronger will come in their place. Unless he becomes strong enough in these next years to resist that darkness, he will go mad, or he will become as evil as the one who marked him. And even if he resists, there will still be some residual effect.”

Sirius coughed into his hand, making a sound remarkably like a name beginning and ending with sibilants. Aletha elbowed him in the side.

“One other thing I think you should all know,” Cecy said, glaring at her cousin for an instant. “I

have identified his closest counterpart in the native people of our world, and the counterparts of his mother and father.”

“Please, tell us,” Lily said. “I would assume you're his mother's counterpart?”

“I am.” Cecy lifted her chin proudly. “And glad to be so. Draco's father, though, has no truly direct counterpart among us. He was the result of a line of breeding which never occurred in our world—your ‘mad cousin’, Remus, in that world succeeded.”

Remus shuddered. “A fool in the early seventeenth century,” he told Molly and Arthur, and Gerald and Alice, who were looking at him curiously. “He was the child of the branch of the Beauvoi family which was not magical, the descendants of Dafydd Beauvoi's brother, and suddenly found himself with magic and a cousin named William he had never known about. When he saw the wealth that William enjoyed, and the pleasure William found in both magic and his chosen vocation, he decided that if he could only inherit William's place he would find that pleasure.”

“Ah, yes,” Arthur said in sudden recollection. “He tried to use a magical poison, didn't he? One of the sorts that mimics a natural illness?”

Remus nodded. “He ingratiated himself with William, flattered him and complimented his acting, and finally got himself invited on a boating trip with the company which included an outdoor lunch. William went to answer a call of nature, the cousin dropped his present into the wineglass he'd been asked to hold... simple as that, or so he thought. When William returned, he handed the wine back and walked away.”

“But, of course, it didn't work,” Gerald said. “Because of your line's natural affinity for snakes, William was immune to the poison.”

“He... might have been,” said Remus diplomatically. “Fortunately for me, he didn't test that theory, as a snake he'd been conversing with earlier had seen the poisoning and warned him away. He was actually breaking his usual rule to have that conversation, or so his diary says. It was as though someone whispered in his ear that this would be a good day to get to know the local wildlife.”

“A good day for me, certainly,” Danger said, running her hand up her husband's arm. “And for our family.” She shook her head. “I'm sorry, Cecy, we flew past what you were going to tell us...”

“What you did,” Cecy said, “was provide me with the perfect explanation. Draco's surname is Malfoy, an obvious derivative of your own—or is there not a piece of the story about that?”

“Oh, yes.” Remus sighed. “William spread the story around, and no one would have anything to do with his cousin. They called him “Malfoi”, or “bad faith”, a play on words with his surname and what he'd tried to do. There were a few bad apples who took him to their hearts, of course, and he tried to claim the name was a badge of honor for his daring, but he never amounted to anything. In Draco's world, I assume, the opposite is true.”

“Precisely.” Cecy inclined her head. “Can you then guess who might be the closest analogue we have to a father for Draco, and to Draco himself?”

A long moment of silence.

“Well,” Remus said finally. “It seems I've surpassed you after all, Arthur. If by rather unconventional means.”

If the laughter resulting from this quip was a bit strained, no one was impolite enough to notice.

## **Be Careful**

### **6: How High You Fly**

Ron caught his breath as the laughter in the small dining room died down. “You two sound like Fred and George,” he said, waving at Draco and Ray. “You're sure you're not related?”

Draco had a brief moment of panic. He knew his relation to all the pureblood families of his own world, but this wasn't it. “I—don't think so—”

“Maybe somewhere,” Ray said smoothly. “But it'd be a few hundred years back if it was. Not enough to count.”

“You do have a relation,” said Luna Lovegood, speaking for the first time. Her eyes, a blue-gray rather than Meghan's silver, went from Ray to Draco and back again. “Not a blood one, though. Your blood is very different. It's your minds and your souls that are alike.”

“The oracle has spoken.” Ray took Luna's hand and kissed it. “I thank you deeply, my lady, and beg you to forgive me for forgetting our plans for the end of this week in the strange events of this morning.”

“You are forgiven.” Luna kissed her fingertip and brushed it against Ray's cheek. “As long as you promise to lead me out first of all.”

Ray laid his hand reverently across the place Luna had kissed. “How could I let another take my place?”

Draco frowned, trying to remember if the plans for the end of the week had been discussed at the meal just past. There'd been some talk about a party, but—

“It's Luna's coming-out ball, Draco,” Meghan said, apparently seeing the confusion on his face. “She was sixteen in June, so it's time. Even if she won't be doing what most girls do.” She grinned. “There's a reason it's going to be here and not at her home.”

“Besides the fact that our house isn't nearly large enough for a decent ball?” Neville put in. “My mum married her dad a few years ago,” he added to Draco, “but we're not rich. Not like some people.”

“We're innocent victims of circumstance.” Ray spread his hands wide. “We can't help that we suffer from excess wealth.”

Harry snorted. “You do not. You enjoy every minute of it.”

Draco sniggered with the rest at the injured look on Ray's face. “So humor me,” he said. “Why is L—Luna's ball going to be here?” A silent sigh of relief—he'd caught himself before he called her Lovegood, or worse, Loony. It might be just a dream, he might technically be able to insult her and get away with it, but if he started bending the rules, the rules might start bending back.

“For the same reason mine's going to be at the Lion's Den in August,” Ginny said. “Actually, for both the same reasons. Official and unofficial.”

“And those are...”

“Officially, it's just because our families are very good friends,” Harry said. “And we have the larger houses. Unofficially—” He took Ginny's hand in his and smiled at her. “You're supposed to become eligible for marriage the day you come out, but sometimes there are already promises made before that.”

“Ah-ha.” Draco looked from Luna and Ray to Harry and Ginny. “So it's like a secret signal saying, *I plan to live here someday, hands off or else ?*”

Everyone laughed. “Basically,” Harry said over the noise. “So does anyone want anything else to eat, or can we start the clock?”

Ron grabbed one last piece of bread, Meghan took a slice of apple from the fruit plate in front of her, and Luna picked a grape from hers. “I think we're ready now,” she said.

Ray leaned back in his chair. “Excellent.” He shut his eyes, his face took on a look of concentration, and—

Draco jumped six inches. The sound which had come out of Ray's mouth was not English, not even a human language.

*All right. Maybe I wasn't as wrong as I thought I was.*

A soft gong sounded three times. “Attention,” said a mellifluous voice from nowhere in particular. “Attention. The evening game of Quidditch will commence on the back pitch in thirty minutes. All those wishing to play will please assemble on the pitch in thirty minutes. Thank you.”

“Marvelous,” said Hermione happily. “That gives us just time for a reading. What shall we have tonight?”

“Reading?” Draco asked Luna as the rest of the dinner group left, discussing the merits of various odd-sounding groups of words.

“Hermione's mother cut down some plays so that we could take parts and read them aloud,” Luna said, smiling at him as he held the door for her. “Stories, too; we take turns with the descriptions

and read the dialogue in parts like the plays. We generally have readings any night we don't have music or a full play.”

“When you say music,” Draco said slowly, “do you mean...”

“I play the piano,” Luna finished for him. “And sing. We all sing. Most of us play an instrument. Do you?”

“No. I never learned. I wish I had, but...” Draco shrugged. “That was one thing Father didn't think was necessary. Too girlish, he said. Not fit for a young man.”

Luna laughed. “Your father sounds silly. If no men sang, we wouldn't have any deep voices for the choruses, and half our orchestra would be missing if there were no male players!”

“I'll make sure to tell him that the next time I see him,” Draco said with a straight face, and was rewarded with another laugh.

*She acts saner here than she does at home. As much as I know about her there. I never really knew her, just saw her at a distance and heard what everyone said. Which is most of what I knew about Potter and Weasley and Granger, really, or Longbottom or Ginny Weasley, or any of them.*

*And her eyes aren't buggy, either. They're just wide. She always looks surprised, but it's happy surprise. She's glad to see whatever she sees.*

*I wish I could learn how to do that.*

Still talking about music, they started down the hall towards the reading room, where Hermione was already distributing copies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

---

Remus pulled Cecilia aside as the adults of the house party went into the dining room for their sweet course. “I have to ask, Cecy,” he said softly. “Is it possible this boy is the one we've been waiting for?”

Cecy spread her hands. “It is possible. Whether he is or not, that I could not tell you.”

“Which is why I didn't ask. A possibility is all I need at the moment.” Remus kissed her cheek. “Thank you. It takes a load off my mind.”

“No, thank you,” Cecy corrected. “For allowing me to make shameless use of your house, and for instructing your children and the others here to treat this mysterious stranger as though he were nothing more marvelous than a visitor from overseas, to ask him few questions and accept oddities without shock. It is more than I could have hoped.”

“Then you don't know me very well, do you?” Remus teased.

Cecy smiled, but lowered her eyes. “I was more deeply within Draco's mind than he knew,” she

said. “It is not a world I will soon forget.”

“Oh?” Remus offered her his arm, and they entered the dining room together. “Are there any stories which are appropriate to tell while eating?”

“A few.” Cecy chuckled. “Let me decide what I shall have, and then I will attempt to recall them.”

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“Give me your hands, if we be friends,” Ray declaimed, his book set aside on a chair, “and Robin shall restore amends.”

The small group, now augmented by the nearest siblings of all parties—Fred and George Weasley, rising fifth year Lyssa Potter, and rising fourth years Marcus Black and Jonathan Beauvoi—applauded dutifully, almost drowning out the soft gong.

“Time,” Ray said, jumping up.

The voice from nowhere spoke again as Hermione and Luna swiftly gathered up the books. “Attention. Attention. The evening game of Quidditch is about to begin. All those who wish to play, please proceed to the pitch. All those who wish to watch, please proceed to the stands. Thank you.”

“To the broomshed!” Harry called. “Last one there gets the Cleansweep Three!”

Draco dodged the first rush of people out the door, then joined the half-dozen stragglers who brought up the rear, laughing and chatting. Lyssa sneaked up behind Marcus, laid her hands on his shoulders, and hoisted herself into the air, landing neatly on his back. He grunted but wrapped his arms back around her, then twisted his head to look at her. “How's the weather up there?” he inquired.

“Wonderful, thank you,” Lyssa said sweetly. “Move along, now, we don't want to be late.”

“You'd better watch out,” Jonathan warned. “You might find yourself with a bucking bronco.”

“I'm not worried.” Lyssa patted Marcus' close-cropped head. “He's my sweet widdle horsie.”

The ‘sweet widdle horsie’ snorted, lowered his head, and charged down the corridor, scattering people to each side, Lyssa shrieking and clinging to his shirt.

“Well, they won't get the Cleansweep Three,” Fred Weasley said.

“But at this pace, we might,” George noted. “Let's pick it up a bit, people—march! 'eft, 'ight, 'eft, 'ight...”

Draco stepped out of the way of the quick-marching twins, then fell in behind them, taking care to walk a bit off the beat. Jonathan, he noticed, didn't seem to be in a rush. “You coming?” he asked

over his shoulder.

“I’ll get there,” Jonathan said, examining something on the wall. “You go on ahead.”

“You’re not worried about getting a bad broom?”

Jonathan looked up and grinned. “I live here, remember? I can’t ride my own broom in a match, it wouldn’t be fair, but I can swap someone else for theirs. Besides, I play Keeper. Don’t need to be quite as fast for that.”

“Good point.” Draco half-turned to follow the crowd, then stopped. “Are there fixed positions people play?”

“Not fixed, but we all know who likes to play what.” Jonathan shrugged a shoulder. “We get it figured out most games eventually.”

“Thanks.” Draco jogged down the hall, a half-formed idea appearing in his mind. He let it be—it would either clear itself up or it wouldn’t, he couldn’t force it.

*Right now, there’s Quidditch to play.*

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“Are you sure you want to let this kid come and go in your house if he’s got Dark magic on him?” James asked Remus on the way down the stairs to the Quidditch pitch. “Won’t that attract you-know-what?”

“They have a name,” said Lily from the next step down. “Just saying it won’t make them appear. Besides, if we can’t trust the wards here—”

“I know, I know, but I wouldn’t want to tempt fate, or God, or whatever. Moony?”

Remus glanced out the stairway window at the sunset sky. “A little temptation is good for the soul,” he said mildly. “And I could do with a few of those floating torches you make so beautifully.”

“Should have known better than to try to get a straight answer out of you,” James grumbled.

“They don’t willingly travel by day,” Lily pointed out. “And that’s when he’ll be here the most. He must know how to defend himself from them—unless his world doesn’t have them?” She tilted her head, directing the question back to Cecy.

“They certainly exist,” Cecy confirmed. “But his exposure to them has been limited. The evil in his world wears a more human face... if you could call that face human.” She grimaced. “I will attempt to reproduce it at some future point. Not now. You would none of you sleep tonight.”

“That bad?” James said.

“That bad.”

The rest of the descent was silent.

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Outside, on the full-sized and brightly-lit Quidditch pitch where Draco's mother's formal garden was (this particular dream-touch had his wholehearted support), Harry threw the Comet Two-Sixty he'd be riding straight up into the air. As it came down, Ray caught it in his right hand. Harry quickly wrapped a hand around the handle above Ray's, and Ray placed his other hand above Harry's. Harry countered with his other hand, Ray released his original grip to take hold of the last of the handle, and Harry slapped a palm flat on top, laughing. “First pick!”

“First pick,” Ray conceded, letting go of the broom and stepping back.

“Ron,” Harry said without hesitation. “Need a good Keeper when it's late.”

Ray took a moment to look over the assembled players. “Malfoy,” he said after a moment, holding up a hand to indicate this was not yet his pick. “What position d'you usually play?”

Draco slid between Ginny and George to come to the front of the group. “Seeker.”

A long “Oooooohhhh” rose around him, and twelve heads turned to look at Harry.

Harry grounded the end of the Comet and leaned on it. “You any good?” he asked nonchalantly.

Draco copied the pose on his own Nimbus Two Thousand. “Fair to middling,” he said in the same tone.

The Weasley twins snickered to one another, Hermione and Lyssa covered their mouths, and Marcus and Meghan both had suspicious-sounding fits of coughing. Harry merely lifted an eyebrow. “We'll see, won't we?”

“I don't know. Will we?” Draco asked Ray.

“I think we will.” Ray nodded. “C'mon over.”

The picking moved quickly after that, and when it was finished Draco took a surreptitious look at his team. He'd be flying for the Green Team alongside Neville and George as Beaters (there seemed to be an unwritten rule that the twins could not play on the same team); Luna, Meghan, and Ray as Chasers; and Jonathan as Keeper. Harry's team, Red Team, had Ron for Keeper; Ginny, Hermione, and Lyssa as Chasers; and Fred and Marcus as Beaters.

*Merlin, is my mind strange. I'd never have imagined playing with, or against, a team like this...*

*Should be fun, though.*

“Who's going to ref?” he asked, pulling a loose green jersey over his day robes.

“Who do you think?” George hooked a thumb at a tall, red-haired figure emerging from the house, carrying a box under one arm and a broom over the opposite shoulder. “He's perfect for it.”

Draco squinted and made out, not at all to his surprise, horn-rimmed glasses and a prim look of distaste on the approaching face.

*All right, that I could have made up.*

“Why do you always leave me with the Cleansweep Three?” Percy Weasley demanded as he stepped over the boundary line onto the pitch.

“Because you're never fast enough,” Fred said, straddling his own broom. “Let's have it, pregame talk, let's go, move, move, move.”

Percy set the box of balls on the ground and opened it, taking out the Quaffle and a whistle on a lanyard, which went around his neck. The Bludgers, straining at their straps, and the Snitch in its pouch he left alone. “We're going to have a clean, friendly game,” he called aloud, his voice clearly reaching the small stands in which the adults and younger children were now sitting. “No fouls, no foolery. And remember—”

“Don't fly outside the lights,” both teams chanted, Draco coming in late and guiltily.

*Don't fly outside the lights? That doesn't sound like it's just against the rules...*

“Players aloft!” Percy shouted. Draco shoved off, the Nimbus responding well to his commands, if not up to the standards of his own broomstick at home.

*I'd rather fly a clunker in a real game than the best broom in the world alone.*

Ron and Jonathan sped off for the goals, Neville, Marcus, and the twins spread out with their bats, and Harry parked himself above the small circle of Chasers in the center. Draco opted to stay near his own end, keeping his eyes on the box where the Snitch still lurked. *If I can see where it goes...*

Percy pulled out his wand and released the Bludgers and Snitch. The Bludgers whirred up into the air next to him, while the Snitch disappeared instantly in the whirring way Snitches had. Draco made a face. *So much for that. Just another game against Potter, then.*

He glanced up at Harry, who grinned across at him and threw him a thumbs-up.

*A friendly Potter. All of them, friendly.*

Draco grinned back and returned the gesture.

*And I bet they'll stay friendly even if I beat them.*

“On the whistle!” Percy bellowed. “Three, two—”

A shrill note, and he flung the Quaffle aloft. The Bludgers shot off in different directions, one of them speeding straight at Draco, and his mind assumed its Quidditch thought forms without waiting for permission.

*Stay on broom now. Have long philosophical thoughts later.*

He shot under the Bludger with a whoop and set himself to looking for the Snitch.

## Be Careful 7: How Hard You Fall

Draco wove a complicated pattern around the members of the Green Team, shifting his weight to turn the broom without thinking about it any more than he thought about where to put his feet while walking. He'd missed Quidditch more than he dared admit.

*Let Potter have his high ground. I prefer to be down in the thick of things. Nine times out of ten, people will let you know where the Snitch is faster than you'd see it yourself...*

A squeak from the other end of the pitch. Draco dodged a Bludger and a Weasley in the same motion and flung his broom that way.

*Just like that.*

Lyssa shrieked, threw the Quaffle straight up in the air, and flew across his path in what looked like blind panic, but Draco would have bet money she'd done it on purpose. No sister of Harry Potter's would be a bad flyer.

*Plus, she's just called his attention—if the way he dotes on his friends is any indication, he'd be the most overprotective big brother that ever was...*

No surprise, a glance over his shoulder showed him Harry diving and gaining fast. Eyes back ahead—there, a shimmer of gold just ducking behind Neville—

“MOVE!” Draco bellowed, and Neville swerved violently to the left but managed to stay on his broom. The Snitch jittered in midair for a second, then shot off towards the Green goalposts, Draco on its tail, Harry on his.

The world narrowed to a tiny, glittering ball and its wild gyrations. Up to the left, down in a dizzy spin, right and forward straight as a spell, it didn't matter—Draco shifted his weight yet again, locking his legs around the back of the broom, freeing his hands for the catch—he could barely see the Snitch now, but the whirring of the wings would let him find it even in the dark—

The Nimbus jerked and shuddered, as though it'd caught a Stopping Spell. Draco spun in place and snarled. Harry had both hands locked in the twigs of Draco's broom and was pulling hard enough to make veins stand out on his unmarked forehead. His face was set, hard and desperate.

Anger flooded Draco, even as he recognized the ploy from his own third year. “What's wrong,

Potter?” he shouted, placing his hands carefully back on the broom handle. “Can't win by playing fair?”

“Don't be an arse!” Harry shouted back. “Look where you are!”

“I was within a second or two of winning, until you decided to cheat!” Draco leaned back towards Harry, as though he had no thought but yelling at the other boy, but his mind was whirring. *Wait until he's not expecting it... wait... wait...*

Harry stared, loosing his grip slightly. “You think this is still about—”

*Now!*

Draco flung his entire weight forward and to the right, wrenching his broom around in an end-for-end turn. Harry, still holding the twigs and not paying attention to his own seat, yelled in shock as the move simultaneously jerked him off his broom and yanked his hands free from Draco's.

*We're only about twenty feet up, he'll get off with a few broken bones, but that'll teach him not to foul me—*

Except—Harry's grip hadn't been entirely broken—he was still clinging one-handed to the twigs of the Nimbus, which was now tilting alarmingly backwards—

*Merlin's pointed hat—*

Draco threw himself forward on the broom, pulling it back to something resembling horizontality, and had an instant in which to appreciate the ridiculous nature of the flying seesaw he'd just assembled before his foot slipped.

*I'm too far forward, none of the charms work on this part of the broom—*

Draco tried to regain his balance, but Harry chose this moment to make a try for the handle as well, and the Nimbus jerked out from under Draco's sweat-slick palm, startling a yelp from him.

*I don't want to find out what happens if you fall in a dream and don't wake up before you hit the ground—*

Too late now. His last finger's grip came loose from the handle, brushed something cold and soft, and then he was falling.

His only consolation was that the broom's rebound leap had jolted Harry loose as well.

*So we both get hurt. And then he beats me up for getting him hurt.*

*Got any more bright ideas, Draco?*

He hit the ground. Only it wasn't the ground—it was too soon, and it didn't hurt enough, it felt

like a taut net rather than hard dirt and grass—

He dropped the final five feet from whatever he'd landed on first to the actual ground, knocking the breath out of him. An instant later, Harry landed on top of him.

Ow.

Above him, Harry echoed the sentiment out loud, and then swore. “How did we—no, never mind, it doesn't matter, we just have to get back in.” He rolled off Draco and grabbed his shoulder. “Come on, Malfoy, get up—”

Draco forced his lungs to work, pulling in a great, wheezing breath, and flicked an obscene gesture at Harry. “You go,” he said, shoving at the hand with what attention he could take from getting enough air. “Go, if you're so worried—”

“What is wrong with you? Don't you even—” Harry stopped short. “No, you don't, do you? And—hell. Here they come.”

Halfway through his first decent breath, Draco felt his chest muscles seize up again, but this time with the painful spasm of intense cold. The lights from the pitch behind them faded almost to blackness, and a pang of worry shot through him.

*“Here they come.” A “they” that brings cold and darkness and—*

*Oh, no. No. Please no.*

Draco levered himself painfully up onto his forearms and froze dead still.

*This would be why we weren't supposed to fly outside the lights.*

Tattered black robes rustled in a wind no one else could feel, hoods turned to register his movement. A dozen dementors floated only a few feet from him, and more materialized out of the darkness even as he watched, boxing him and Harry in, keeping them from running anywhere but back towards the house—

*The house. I know they have wards, I fell through them. If we can just get back, we'll be safe—*

Draco shoved himself upwards and got his feet under him, coming up just beside Harry, who had his wand out and ready but hadn't cast anything yet. “You going to help, then?” Harry muttered.

“I can try.” Draco fumbled inside his robes and found the proper pocket. His hands were shaking, either from cold or from nerves, but he closed his fingers firmly around his wand and pulled it out, bringing it up to dueling position. “I know the incantation, but I've never been able to do it properly.”

“You really aren't from around here.” Harry turned slightly, putting his left shoulder against Draco's right. “Back to back, Patronuses together, then run for the wards. With two to hold them

off, we ought to make it. Ready?"

"Give me a moment." Draco tried to ignore the small voices gibbering in terror at the back of his mind, instead casting about for a good memory. *Happy. Something that made me happy. The happiest I've ever been.*

Opening his eyes to sunlight and a smiling face, a child's counting rhyme and no words of shame for tears... perhaps not a dream come true, but at least a dream to which he could return, a place to hide when the world came crashing down...

"Ready."

"Good." Harry's right side tensed as he brought his wand up to begin the spell. Draco raised his own wand, holding tight to the moment he'd known the dream was his to keep—

"Expecto patronum!" Harry shouted, slashing his wand down in a loop. Draco copied him a second behind, throwing his disbelieving joy of a few hours before into the incantation.

*I get enough of you lot when I'm awake, he thought fiercely towards the dementors. I don't need you in my dreams. Bugger off.*

A silvery bird erupted from the end of his wand, wings spread wide and beak open in a silent screech of defiance. Draco goggled at it. *Did I just—*

"RUN!" Harry shouted, grabbing his arm and pulling him a few steps.

*Good idea.* Draco abandoned amazement and sprinted for the sparkling shield he could now dimly see, a double shadow stretching in front of him from the silvery light of two Patronuses behind. Harry was at the shield, through it, with no more trouble than running through a waterfall—one of the shadows faded, Harry's Patronus must have sensed it was no longer needed—Draco threw himself forward at the shield—

The taut-net feeling again, a shock of pain up his left arm, and then the shield rebounded, throwing him backwards and to the ground. He retained just enough presence of mind to fall right this time, half-rolling and coming up on one knee with his wand out, but the light within his Patronus was flickering badly, and the dementors were crowding up where it wasn't—

*Why can't I get through? Was it because I pulled Harry off the broom? No, it's the Mark, it has to be—the shield must be set to repel anything evil, and there's enough Dark magic in the Mark to qualify—*

The bird Patronus vanished. The dementors pressed in.

*I'm not strong enough to fight evil. I'm not even strong enough to stop myself from being stupid. I'm weak, I always have been...*

His wand fell from his hand, and he collapsed, gasping for breath against the cold lapping in

waves against him. Any second, one of the dementors would bend over him, lower its hood with its rotting hands, fasten its mouth onto his—

*Not like this—not like this—please, somebody help me—*

A flash of light around him, and the world shook itself into a new, oddly familiar configuration. Everything was too big, colors looked odd, smells and sounds were far more interesting than they should be—

A blur of motion to one side caught his attention. He rolled onto his feet, and was only mildly surprised to find that he had four of them instead of two.

*This way!* yowled the patch-furred cat who skidded to a halt at his side. *Follow me!*

He bounded after her, following her wild dodges this way and that, seeing streaks of silver light overhead and hearing shouts in voices he didn't quite understand but knew he should have—a great curved something loomed overhead, he shrank away instinctively, but the cat was running towards a tiny hole close to the ground, and he could smell safety on its other side—

He shot through behind her, and the hole snapped shut almost on his tail. Heavy footsteps pounded past, and a huge hand reached down and scooped him up. A memory of pain and humiliation poured over him, and he squealed and writhed, trying to bite at the prisoning fingers—

*Stop that!* the cat hissed from her perch on a nearby giant's shoulder. *Friends!*

He promptly shut his mouth, gritting his teeth against the jarring thuds of his captor's footfalls. This made no sense—why did he think he recognized it—

Light flashed around him again, the world returned to its proper size and shape, and Draco hit the ground hard, half-cushioned by Harry's grasping hand on his shoulder. He flipped over just in time to see Hermione explode out of the form of the calico cat who'd led him back through the shield and stumble backwards into Ray's arms.

*An Animagus. She's an Animagus. And I understood her. So I must have been—*

A man cleared his throat beside them. Guiltily, Draco turned to look.

Ray and Hermione's father, the man he would have called Professor Lupin if he hadn't known better, stood beside them, his arms crossed and one eyebrow raised. “An interesting choice of tactics,” he said. “Who did the transfiguration?”

“I did, sir,” Harry said. “It was the first thing I could think of.”

“And you opened the wards, Reynard?”

“Yes, Father.” Ray's voice was neither submissive nor angry, but he did sound distinctly worried.

“I'm sorry I didn't ask first. There wasn't time.”

“There wasn't time.” The elder Beauvoi repeated the words carefully. “As it happens, you're right. There wasn't. However, if there had been...”

“I'd have asked.” Ray lifted his chin. “Even if I am nearly of age now. And the heir.”

His father raised the other eyebrow to match the first. “That and a Galleon will buy you a new set of robes. When I throw you out on your ear for being a young fool. If you'd made a mistake opening the wards, or let them close even an instant too soon—”

“But he didn't, Father,” Hermione interrupted. “He didn't, and we're all safe now.”

Her father turned to face her. “When I want your opinion, young lady, I will give it to you. I assume you took it upon yourself to fetch our guest because your form was the one which fit through the opening?”

“Yes, Father.” A more polite tone Draco couldn't have imagined, but there was a definite hint of a smile on Hermione's face. “Ray's might have fit too, but he couldn't change forms while he had the spell going.”

“And there wasn't time for anyone to take it over from him.”

Three heads nodded.

“And meanwhile...” Lord Beauvoi looked up and around at what Draco now realized were the rest of the Quidditch players, still on their brooms, most of them very pale. “The rest of your friends threw Patronuses, which pass through our wards as readily as anything without evil intent, to keep the dementors back while Hermione and Draco were returning.”

Nods and murmurs of “Yes, sir” greeted this, but Draco barely heard them. His mind was fixed on four words.

*Anything without evil intent.*

His heart took up residence somewhere around his knees.

*I don't want to be evil. I don't know if I want to be good, at least not shining-warrior good, but I know I don't want to be evil. But they're not going to believe that, not when they saw it for themselves—*

“Draco.”

He jumped and looked up. Lord Beauvoi was on one knee beside him, smiling Professor Lupin's smile. “You may stop looking stricken. I don't bite.” He paused, glancing at two points over Draco's head—Ray and Hermione, at a guess. “Not anymore, that is.”

Everyone else seemed to find this hysterically funny.

## Be Careful 8: Who You Get To Know

Draco managed a small smile, fueled mostly by his flicker of curiosity—*if he doesn't bite anymore, does that mean he used to be a werewolf and he's not now?*—but fear and worry eroded it away within a few seconds.

“I'm sorry,” he said, looking down at the grass. “I didn't know. About the wards or the dementors.” *Please don't make me leave, it isn't me, I'm not evil, it's just this thing on me, I thought I wanted it but I don't and I know you won't believe me but it's true, really it is...*

“And that is our fault, not yours. We should have told you sooner. Forgive us?”

The tone, as much as the words, made Draco snap his head up in disbelief. He knew falsehood and flattery, knew what traces they left in a voice, and there was no sign of them in what Lord Beauvoi had said. The blue eyes, too, were apologetic but met Draco's without hesitation.

*I think he means it...*

Belatedly, Draco registered he'd been asked a question. “Yes. I mean, I will. I mean—”

“I understand,” Lord Beauvoi cut him off gently. “And thank you. Now, I think we should move indoors for the rest of the evening. I am sorry,” he raised his voice to carry above the boos and indignant cries from the Quidditch players, “to deprive you of your game, but I would rather not tempt fate.”

“No need to worry,” said Percy, pushing forward with something in his hand. “The game's over.”

Everyone, player and spectator alike, spoke up at the same moment. “What?” “How?” “When?” “But they didn't...”

“It's a bit irregular, I know,” Percy said over the noise, “but the Snitch's inbuilt monitoring spells are very clear. One of the two Seekers got a finger around it, if only for an instant. This does count as a capture—the precedent dates back to 1883—and the game is therefore over.”

He bent down and handed the Golden Snitch, its silver wings still flickering hopefully, to Draco.

*I just beat Harry Potter at Quidditch.*

*Now I know this is a dream.*

Draco closed his hand around the Snitch, looked up at his teammates, and grinned. “Well, what are you all standing around for? We won!”

“YES!” shrieked Meghan at the top of her voice, and the Green Team went wild. Neville and George thumped bats, while Ray, Jonathan, and Luna started doing a strange, sinuous dance around several members of the Red Team. Ray and Jonathan were hissing under their breaths, and Luna wove her body through contortions that had Draco frankly staring.

*If this is what she's like all the time here, suddenly I see why Ray wants her.*

Lord Beauvoi offered him a hand up, and he absently took it, still watching the dance. *She's pretty thoroughly taken at this point, but maybe if I want her to have a sister, she will...*

“Try looking closer to home,” Lord Beauvoi said quietly. “You might be surprised what you find.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, my lord.”

Lord Beauvoi coughed, then cleared his throat. “There's no need for formality, Draco. Call me Moony, as your friends do.”

“All right, sir—I mean Moony.”

“Good catch.” Moony smiled. “In another few weeks you may do it without a thought. At the moment, I think there are people waiting on you to start their celebration.”

Draco nodded and turned around.

Harry was standing behind him, his right hand extended. “Good game,” he said.

“Good game,” Draco agreed.

They shook on it.

---

*I like this dream. Can I stay, Mummy, please? Pretty please with chocolate on top?*

Sitting off to one side of the largest parlor, Draco chuckled to himself at his little-boy inner voice. After all, even if he couldn't stay, he could come back, and that was almost as good.

*But only almost as good. And I've never liked settling for second-best.*

He amused himself for a moment, imagining how he could do it. Discover a spell that would keep him asleep and in dream-state forever, then set his bedroom up to look as though he'd been ambushed by Potter and his friends?

*I'd end up in that ward at St. Mungo's. At least my body would. I'd be here...*

*Unless one of the Healers found the spell and took it off. In which case I'd have to explain why I didn't want it taken off, and I don't know if I could do that without making everyone think I was insane. And then, of course, they'd leave me there.*

Draco shuddered. *All right, bad plan. Better just keep things as they are.*

“Are you cold?” Abby asked, sidling up beside him.

“No,” Draco said curtly. “I'm fine.”

“You look sad. May I sit with you?”

About to say no again, Draco stopped, uncomfortably aware of the pleading in the hazel eyes fixed on his face.

“Yes,” he said. “But no talking.”

Abby covered her mouth and nodded hard, then dashed away to find herself a chair.

*She'll get bored and go away soon enough.*

---

“What's so funny over there?” Harry asked, turning to look at the corner where Draco and Abby were gasping for breath.

“Dunno,” Ron said, taking another bite of his ice cream. “I didn't hear them say anything.”

“I think they're just looking at each other,” said Ginny.

“Looking at each other?” Meghan sipped her tea. “What's funny about looking at each other?”

Neville shrugged. “They must think it is.”

Across the room, Abby turned a moment too soon and caught Draco's eye.

“Apparently so,” said Hermione, as Draco and Abby fell off their chairs laughing.

---

Not even waking up once again at Malfoy Manor could dampen Draco's spirits.

*As long as I stay out of the way, I'll be fine here. And I can go back every night, see them all, help Mum set up our rooms.* Lord and Lady Beauvoi—the lady of the house had matched her husband's request for Draco to use her nickname, and he thought eventually he'd manage, but for the moment ‘Moony’ and ‘Danger’ were a little hard even to think—had decided that since Draco would be coming and going at Fidelus Manor, it made sense for him and his mum to have a suite

of rooms there.

*They're only fourth or fifth cousins to her, nothing at all to me, but they still said we could stop there. Not to mention all the other people they're putting up for the next week, until Luna's ball. I'd say Father and Mother would never let it happen here—opening the house to a load of unrelated people—*

*Except they already are.*

His mind pulled up the two sets of people for comparison, and he grimaced.

*Do I really have to go downstairs?*

---

The answer, of course, was yes, but Draco found ways over the next few days to do exactly what he'd planned—stay out of the way, make himself visible but not noticeable, part of the background and therefore unimportant.

*I never thought I'd want to be unimportant, but when it's a choice between that and getting noticed by them... Draco nipped around a corner just ahead of Amycus and Alecto Carrow. Yes, I think unimportant is the way to go here. Pardon me, submissive little failure coming through, not worth anybody's time, don't bother about me...*

He'd have to remember that one, Draco thought. It would go over well at what Ray and Neenie had called the green-room party.

“That's what you call the room where the actors wait in the theatre,” Ray had explained, “and a ball's more theatre than it is anything else. Costumes, sets, music, dancing...”

“The only thing it hasn't got is a script, and it almost has got that,” Neenie'd added. “There are things girls say to boys and things boys say back to girls, and ways you tell each other things without talking at all.” She'd smiled, her eyes dreamy and far away. “I do love dancing. Especially the slow dances.”

“Only with your Ickle Ronniekins,” Ray had teased, and then run for his life as Neenie shrieked in outrage and flung a Knee-Reversing Jinx in his direction.

*What would it be like to have a girl get that angry over me? Draco wondered idly, starting up the narrow back stairs. Pansy would have bit anyone who tried to get at me, but that's just because I was her property and she didn't want squatters. Now that I'm nobody or worse, she'll probably never look at me again.*

He snorted. *No great loss. Face like a pug and temper like a bulldog. I ought to be able to do better.*

For an instant, wide blue-gray eyes and a wondering smile hung before him, framed with dark

blonde hair, companioned with a soft and silvery voice...

*And she'd look at me, why? She's Ray's girl. She has been since they were eight years old. They're practically engaged, for Merlin's sake! Think about something else. Something else...*

*What about this Professor cousin of the Beauvois' Mum wants to introduce me to? Draco emerged from the stairs on the second floor, peered in both directions, and started for his own room at a trot when the hallway proved clear. She seems to think it'll be good for me to meet him, but she also keeps chuckling about it, and I can't figure out why...*

---

The great entrance hall of Fidelus Manor was aglow with candles as well-lit and well-warded carriages and carpets arrived at the door, to be greeted by one or another of the family and shown to the ballroom. Danger was the last downstairs, due to an untimely accident above with the two youngest children, but no sooner had her feet touched the shining hardwood floor than she was hurrying across it to clasp the hand of a wizard some years older than herself, his thick black hair touched lightly with silver. "I'm so glad you could come!"

"The coming-out of the mother of my cousin's heirs to be—how could I miss it?" The wizard smiled at her. "How quickly time passes. It seems like only yesterday I was attending yours, in this same house. And you haven't changed a bit since then."

"Oh, do stop." Danger laughed, waving away the flattery. "Where's Minerva?"

"She and Molly Weasley disappeared together as soon as we got here. Probably off fussing about grandchildren." He frowned. "I wish she wouldn't worry so. Morgan's come through two births without trouble, Reggie's supported her every step of the way, there's no reason to expect anything unusual from the third one..."

Danger planted her hands on her hips. "Don't tell me you're attempting to understand women. You of all people should know it's futile."

"Yes, yes, very foolish of me." The wizard pulled a long face. "Still, I can't help hoping. We are all human, after all, aren't we?"

Danger laughed again. "Supposedly. I must circulate, but you'll dance with me at least once tonight?"

"Dare I hope for the honor?" He bowed over her hand. "The lady of the house, after all... your favor will be widely sought..."

"If I cannot spare one dance for my husband's favorite cousin, I am no lady." Danger dropped a curtsy in response. "Oh, one thing—if you happen to see a very fair boy about Ray's age wandering about looking lost, would you take him on your twigs for a few minutes until you can return him to Cecy?"

“Ah, yes, the dream-child.” The wizard nodded thoughtfully. “I’d hoped to meet him, actually. Ask him a few questions, discern some of the differences between his native world and our own. Do you think I could?”

“As long as you keep those few questions to a few.” Danger gave him an admonishing look. “You and Albus, you’re exactly the same—one smell of a magical mystery, and you’re hot on the trail, never bothering for the comfort of those around you…”

“Only a few questions,” the wizard cut her off, his face solemn. “Fewer than ten. I promise.”

“Good.” Danger nodded and started towards the front door, where another family had just arrived.

“Of course,” a quiet voice mused behind her, “if he showed no signs of anxiety, and if he agreed to answer a few more than ten questions…”

Danger whirled. “Tom Marvolo Riddle!”

Tom took a step back, laughing, his hands held up in surrender.

Danger hissed briefly at him between her teeth. “And don’t even try to tell me what I said,” she instructed him tartly. “I get it quite enough from my own children.”

“Not from Remus?” Tom raised an eyebrow. “I would have thought…”

“Shoo.” Danger flapped a hand at him. “Go annoy someone else.”

Still chuckling, the Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry bowed once more and made a strategic withdrawal before a superior force.

## Be Careful 9: What You Say You'll Do

Draco sat at one of the small tables, a drink held loosely in his right hand, and watched the dancers swirl around the floor. He'd danced in some of the patterns earlier, but this was a waltz, and he didn't have a partner for it. Besides, his feet were starting to hurt, and there was a thought niggling at him he wanted to tease out.

*Here thought. Nice thought. Come get a Thought Treat...*

His own silliness made him smile. He'd have to tell Abby that one. It would make her giggle.

*Abby. She's part of it. Whatever it is.*

A moment's searching found her, on the other side of the dance floor, chattering away with Susie Black, both of them watching the dancers with a bit of envy.

*They're so little. They'd never be at any dance like this at home...*

Those two words brought the thought from hiding.

*I've been to dances all my life at home, but none like this. Draco let his eyes sweep across the room. None where everyone looked happy. None where the girls were dancing with the boys because they wanted to, not because their parents made them. Maybe a few of them, but they were the exception, not the rule.*

He leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his drink. *I've fit in so quickly here because it is like home, in a lot of ways. But there's also a lot of ways it's not. Mum can help me with some of those, Ray and Neenie have got me through a few others, but there are some I'll have to do on my own...*

A deep sigh. *I suppose part of my problem is, I can't help feeling that this is home. Or that it ought to be. That my real life has been a bad dream—that this is what it always should have been*

—  
“It should, shouldn't it?” Draco murmured aloud as the orchestra brought the music to a swelling conclusion. “This is what it should really be like. All the traditions, but with life in them. Not just going through the motions.”

Girls sank into deep curtseys, boys bowed to their partners, and the waltz was finished. Draco applauded with the rest of the spectators.

*But 'going through the motions' is what I'm going to spend my life, my real life, doing. I don't think I'm strong enough to challenge it. Maybe I could introduce a few new things, but I wouldn't dare do too much.*

*At least I can come here to get ideas. To see what things work. And to have a rest when real life is too much.*

He finished his drink in one quick swallow and started towards the buffet, set along the far wall, to get another.

*It's better than nothing.*

"Excuse me," said a wizard, slipping between two tables to intercept Draco. "Are you Malfoy?"

"Yes, that's me." Draco dipped a shallow bow, looking the man over. Dark hair starting to silver, frank brown eyes set in a strong-jawed face which seemed somehow familiar, though he couldn't place it. "Are you... Professor Riddle?"

"I am." The man held out a hand, and Draco shook it. "I understand you'll be coming to Hogwarts this fall."

"If I can, sir." The honorific attached itself to the sentence naturally. Something about Professor Riddle seemed to demand it. "I'm not here all the time."

"Yes, Cecy's told me a bit about your unusual circumstances. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions, find out more about your world and how it differs from our own. It doesn't have to be tonight, if you're enjoying the ball..."

Draco glanced over his shoulder. Ray had led Luna off the floor and was now fanning her vigorously, disarranging her hair and making her laugh. "Tonight would be fine, sir. If that's all right with you."

"If it weren't, I wouldn't have offered. Let me go and tell my wife where I'll be." Professor Riddle chuckled. "She will scold me, but such is my lot in life. Pardon me a moment?"

Draco nodded and watched the Professor make his way to the other end of the ballroom, to a table where several older witches were sitting. Mrs. Weasley was there, and Neville's mother, and—

*Well, well. Is that—yes, I do believe it is.*

Professor Riddle was addressing himself to a black-haired witch in dark robes with a tartan sash, who wore a look of disapproval on her face that Draco knew all too well.

*I guess there are two Professor Riddles. Unless she kept her maiden name, to make it easier.*

Draco was suddenly grateful he wouldn't be going back to Hogwarts, the real Hogwarts, this fall. He'd never have been able to keep a straight face in Transfiguration after this.

*Maybe that's why Mum's laughed every time she brings up my meeting Professor Riddle. I've told her a lot about home, and she probably knows more from the times she's touched my mind...*

Professor Riddle bowed to kiss his wife's hand, then straightened up. As he did, a trick of the light turned the bit of his face that Draco could see the color of new parchment and threw his cheekbone into high relief, making him look almost skeletal.

Draco took a step back, his palms suddenly damp. The tentative feeling of recognition he'd had when he'd first seen Professor Riddle surged to the fore, followed by rumors he'd thought stupid and discarded at the time he'd heard them, but which were making all too much sense now. Rumors about the Dark Lord's childhood, about his parentage, about the name he'd had before he chose the one no one now dared to speak...

*Which is stupid, if you really think about it, his mind babbled. I mean, who picks out a name for himself if he doesn't want people using it? Who goes around saying, "Oh, I want to be known as such-and-so, but you can't say that or I'll kill you?" No one here would do that—they've all got too much sense—if they pick a nickname, they want you to use it. Like Lord and Lady Beauvoi—Moony and Danger—or Neenie and Ray, but not Ron, he goes after people who call him Ronniekins, but that's because he didn't pick that, someone else picked it for him...*

Draco laughed aloud, a bit shakily at first, but more strongly as his heart slowed from its first terrified rush.

*I've probably got it all wrong. I'm remembering the stories cocked-up because of what I thought I saw. And even if I'm not wrong, he's not the same person he is at home. He teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts, for Merlin's sake! And he's married to McGonagall—no, wait, I don't want to think about that.*

But it was too late. His mind had already seized on the concept and was busily constructing scenarios, complete with visual aids.

*Gaahhh.* Draco scrubbed his hands against his eyes, trying to distract himself with the kaleidoscopic colors against his eyelids. *Some things were just not meant to be imagined.*

"All right, there?" asked Professor Riddle's voice, half-concerned and half-amused.

"Fine, sir," Draco said automatically, letting his hands drop. His vision cleared with a few blinks, and he shook his head, shooing the thoughts away. "I'm fine."

"Good." Professor Riddle beckoned Draco to follow him, then led the way towards a side door. "Do you mind that I've asked the Headmaster to sit in on our conversation? He'd like to meet you, and we often work together in magical research, so it would be helpful to me to have his opinion on this matter."

“I don’t mind.” *It might be useful. Help me keep the worlds separate. And keep from panicking when I think about who I’m actually talking to.* Draco rubbed self-consciously at his left arm, though the Mark hadn’t so much as twinged.

*He might be able to help you with that,* whispered a voice at the back of his mind. *If one Riddle put it on you, maybe another one can take it off...*

“Shut up,” Draco muttered.

“I’m sorry?” Professor Riddle turned back to look at him.

“Nothing, sir. I was... thinking aloud.”

“I do that myself.” The older wizard smiled. “My grandson walks around the house muttering to himself, and when his mother asks him what he’s doing, he says, ‘I’m being Granddad!’”

*He’s got grandchildren? Someone kill me now...*

---

In the middle of Draco’s explanation about inter-House politics at his own Hogwarts, someone tapped on the door of the side room Professor Riddle had led him to.

“Come in,” called Dumbledore—*Lord Albus, they call him, Ray told me that my first day here.*

The door opened, and Draco jumped up. “Mum!”

“Hello, love.” Mum smiled at him. “Albus. Tom.”

“Hello, Cecilia,” said Dumbledore, standing up, as did Professor Riddle. “Come to make sure we’re not mistreating your child?”

“You? Mistreat a child?” Mum laughed. “If it’s possible, I’ve yet to see it. I came to tell you the main event of the evening is about to start.”

“Thank you, Cecy,” Professor Riddle said, waving his wand at the DictaQuill and parchment he’d been using to shrink them to pocket size. “I wouldn’t want to miss that.”

“Nor I. Shall we?” Dumbledore bowed to Mum, then stepped past her into the hall. Professor Riddle murmured something in her ear as he passed, and she watched him go pensively, then turned to face Draco.

“Did you know?” Draco asked before she could speak. “About...” He glanced down the hall. “About him?”

“I suspected.” Mum came inside the room and closed the door behind herself. “Forgive me for finding it funny.”

“No, it is. It is funny. It’s just...” Draco stopped and turned away.

*It’s just, this is everything I’ve ever wanted. And it can’t ever really be mine. As much as I love it here, it’s a dream place, and I’m a real person. I need a real life. Not all the dreams in the world can change that.*

*And even if it were real, I don’t belong here. I never will. I can pretend to belong for a while, but that’s all it will ever be, a pretense. And all pretenses fail sooner or later.*

“What’s troubling you?” asked the quiet voice behind him.

*I wish she wouldn’t do that.* “It doesn’t matter. It’s stupid.”

“We have been over this. I will not laugh at you. With you, perhaps, but not at you.”

“Hard to tell the difference sometimes.” Draco heard the bitterness creeping into his voice and didn’t care.

“Then that is my failure, and I apologize for it.” Footsteps, and then a hand on his shoulder.  
“Please, Draco. Tell me.”

“No!” Draco spun, shoving her hand away. “This isn’t real, don’t you understand that? None of this is real! I’m just deluding myself, trying to play like I belong here, like this is anything more than a dream—”

“Are dreams unimportant, then?” asked Mum calmly.

*No, she’s not my mum, I can’t let myself think like that anymore...* “Compared to real life? Yes.”

“Yet dreams are often all that gives us the strength to continue in real life.”

“Real dreams do that. Dreams about real places, real people, things that might someday come true. Not complete fantasies.” Draco stared at a corner of the wood paneling, tracing patterns in the grain with his eyes. “Not things that could never happen.”

“Fantasies give the mind a place to rest. A game to play, before returning to the hard work of real life.” She circled him until she was in front of him again, intercepting his gaze. “Would you deny yourself sleep because it was a waste of time?”

“You need sleep. You don’t need dreams.”

“I disagree.”

“You do that.” Draco started for the door. “I’m leaving.”

“Where will you go?”

“Upstairs. To bed. Back to the real world.”

“And then?”

“Then I figure out what’s making me dream this, and I stop it happening, and it’s over.”

“As easy as that?”

The undertones of pain in the words nearly stopped Draco, but he steeled his soul against it. Just a dream, he reminded himself. *Not a real person.* “Yeah. As easy as that.”

“I will miss you.”

“Thanks for that.” Draco was slightly disturbed to realize he meant it.

*She is not real. Stop thinking as if she were.*

As he stepped out into the hall, leaving the door open behind him, he heard the first hesitant sob from within. He hesitated for one instant, then kept walking.

*Give into emotional blackmail once, you’ll always do it. I should know—Mother’s used it on me my whole life.*

Ahead of him, the lights of the ballroom seemed to brighten. People were cheering and applauding, and the orchestra was beginning to play another waltz. *Same composer as the last one. That Russian bloke, whatever his name is, the one who no one’s quite sure if he was a wizard or just a Muggle genius...*

Draco turned left halfway down the hall, headed for the back stairs. As he did, a flicker of movement caught his eye in the direction he’d come from. Someone, the edge of their robes just visible in the half-darkness, had entered the room he’d left.

*Good.* He rubbed his arms, trying to force down his sudden goose pimples. *They can deal with her, so I don’t have to...*

A woman’s choked cry broke off abruptly, just as the guttering lamp on the opposite wall went out.

Draco snatched out his wand, lit it, and charged back down the corridor and into the room.

His mum lay crumpled where she’d fallen. The black-robed, unhooded thing floating beside her was just reaching out its rotting hands to lift her to its mockery of a face.

“Get away from her!” Draco screamed, pointing his wand at it. “Expecto patronum!”

## **Be Careful**

### **10: Who You Ask For Help**

“Mum! *Mum!*”

Cecilia roused with a gasp. Dark, it was dark, and so cold, and the boy she'd loved so dearly for such a short time was gone, he'd left her as her only love had left her, as everyone left her eventually—

“Mum, say something, please.”

*But isn't this his voice?*

“Draco?” she whispered.

“Mum!” Strong arms wrapped around her, and she heard the ragged breathing of a boy neither young enough nor old enough to cry. “Mum, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please say you're all right, say it didn't hurt you—”

“There wasn't time.” She remembered now. She had been crying, and the darkness had gathered over her so subtly she hadn't noticed it until the last second, until too late to defend herself.

“How did it get in?” Draco pulled away to look at her—the lamps in the hall were lit again, though not the ones in the room, giving an eerie twilight effect to his face. “I thought the wards...”

“They must have been breached.” Cecilia took her first full breath in what felt like hours. “Enough hungry dementors in one place and magic itself begins to fail. We must hurry, Draco. Sound the alarm.”

“How?”

“The incantation is *Tumultuo*. Point your wand at any wall and say it.”

“*Tumultuo*,” Draco repeated, aiming his wand at the wall nearest them.

Above their heads, a great bell began to toll.

“Good.” Cecilia stood up, Draco assisting her. “Come. They will need every wand they have.”

---

Remus was just bending down to kiss the cheek of his daughter-in-law-elect when the bell sounded for the first time.

“Oh dear,” said Luna.

**“Oh dear” does not begin to express this,** said Danger.

**As usual, love, you’re right.** Remus kissed Luna quickly, then straightened up and turned to face the room, willing his voice to carry. “Our wards have failed,” he said simply. “Hogwarts students and younger, to the middle of the room, please. Adults, wands out, Patronuses at the ready.”

“Everyone check your neighbors,” Danger added, drawing her own wand. “If anyone notices a missing person, speak up.” **No need to worry about the littlest ones, love,** she added silently. **Hermione’s taking care of them.**

**How so?** Remus blinked once and saw, through Danger’s eyes, their oldest daughter on one knee, talking to a young house-elf. **Of course, she called Echo. Good for her.**

**Indeed.** Danger watched the house-elf disappear. **The extra wards on the nursery had better have held. Or I shall be taking strips out of somebody’s hide.**

**I hate to point this out, but you put those wards up yourself.**

**So I’ll take strips out of my own hide. It wouldn’t be the first time.**

Before Remus could come up with an answer for this, Ray turned around from his conference with Harry, looking worried. “No one’s seen Draco or Aunt Cecy,” he said. “They both left, and I don’t think they ever came back.”

“When did they leave?” Remus asked, going to one knee and flattening his hand against the floor.

“Draco left first, with Cousin Tom, about an hour ago. Aunt Cecy’s only been gone a few minutes.”

**Our son and his information network,** Danger commented.

**Amazing, isn’t it?** Remus answered absently, most of his attention on the complex process of querying the inherent magic of the Manor itself. As it roused, awakening to his touch, he fed it the personality impressions of the two missing people. *Find these, he willed. Find them and tell me where they are.*

A picture formed, visible only to him, floating in the air level with his eyes—a blond boy with his arm around a woman’s waist, helping her walk down a hallway towards a brightly lit room. Remus breathed a sigh of relief. **They’re safe,** he told Danger, sending her the picture. **They’re on their way in. Send someone to make sure they get here?**

**Of course.** Danger’s sense diminished for a moment as she spoke to various people around her,

then returned. **Echo's back with Charlie and Nicki, and the other house-elves are already gone. I think we might actually have reacted quickly enough this time.**

**Thank God.** Remus sent his final command to the Manor's magic, then began to disengage himself from it. **Have you seen Albus yet, or Minerva or Tom?**

**Albus is here. Minerva—oh, there she is, over by the door. I think she's waiting for Tom. He went to bring Draco and Cecy in.**

**Good for him.** Remus pulled the last of his magic free and sagged slightly. **That's starting to take more and more out of me.**

**Ray will be of age soon,** Danger said soothingly. **As if he weren't waiting behind you to tell you that himself.**

Remus turned his head. Sure enough, Ray was standing beside him, watching him with a mix of envy and worry. "Father—" he began.

"On your birthday," Remus said firmly. "Not one day sooner. Your hand, please?"

Ray held it out. Remus took it and pulled himself up, then took advantage of the moment to embrace his son. "Take care of your siblings until we get there," he said. "Don't abuse your authority."

"I don't!"

Remus raised an eyebrow. Ray wilted. "Usually," he conceded.

"Keep it that way, then." Remus let go and turned around to find Danger and Albus waiting for him. "Are we ready?" he asked them both.

"I believe so," said Albus as Danger nodded. "All the children in attendance are accounted for. I am only waiting for—ah, here they are."

The adults parted to reveal Minerva and Tom, who had Cecy in his arms. Draco was beside them, looking pale and shaken but with his wand in his hand. Abby detached herself from the huddle of children and ran to him, clinging to his waist. He put his free arm around her and smiled at her.

*Someday I will find out exactly what about Abigail brings out the protective spirit in most adults.*

The doors of the ballroom swung closed with three resounding booms, making most of the children and a few of the adults jump. Remus had been expecting it—it was the Manor's way of telling him everyone was gathered—but it still sent a little frisson through him.

*If we can successfully battle them until the children are safely gone... if we can keep our pairings together long enough to ensure we all get away...*

**Woolgathering,** Danger said pointedly.

**You're right, love. I'm sorry.** Remus pulled his thoughts together and nodded to Albus, who insinuated himself into the crowd of brightly-dressed children and teenagers at the center of the floor. Minerva walked around the edge of the group, shooing some of the smaller ones back into line. Tom set Cecy on her feet and supported her as she swayed.

“You can come with us,” he said under his breath. “There’s no shame in it.”

“And leave everyone else to fight?” Cecy glared at him. “What do you take me for?”

“An intelligent woman,” said Danger acidly. “Who can admit to weakness after a run-in with a dementor—at least I assume you had one, not much else produces that particular color in a person’s face—and get herself to safety while those who have not almost had their souls removed yet tonight get their turn.”

Cecy smiled faintly. “Remind me at your next birthday to get you another sharpening stone for your tongue,” she said. “But since you insist.”

Draco caught Danger’s eye and mouthed a phrase at her. She smiled and nodded.

**Did he just say thank you?** Remus asked.

**He did. And from everything Cecy’s told us about him, that is something rather memorable.**

Tom, Cecy, Draco, and Abby joined the shifting crowd in the middle of the floor just as Albus reached its center and Minerva completed her circuit. “I believe we are ready,” the Headmaster said.

One of the doors on the far side of the ballroom emitted a loud crack, making everyone jump.

“Not a moment too soon,” Remus said, lifting his wand. “Hold tight.”

Hands reached out to hands, arms tightened around chests, and Tom and Minerva pointed their wands toward Albus’, which showered what looked like long purple ribbons over the heads of the children—except that these ribbons stuck fast to the floor around the outside of the group, and spread until they touched one another, creating a rippling violet shield.

Remus spun his wand through the three complex figures, concentrating on the secret room under the Quidditch pitch and what was kept there.

“Ablego navis caeli!”

---

Draco held onto his mum with one arm and Abby with the other, feeling the floor start to shake under his feet. The room outside the shield seemed to melt and run like a watercolor painting—

And then they were somewhere else entirely, a low-ceilinged room with walls of dirt and rock and a wooden floor.

The shield vanished. “Quickly, please,” Professor Dumbledore said, lowering his wand. “Seventh years to the broomshed, sixth and fifth to stabilization points. All others, secure yourselves and your siblings.”

“I have to go,” Draco told Abby, loosening her arms. “I’ll be back in a minute. I think.”

Abby nodded, gray-faced.

“I’ll take care of her,” said Mum, squeezing Draco’s hand. “You go with the others.”

Draco squeezed back, then followed the stream of familiar faces towards—

*That’s a broomshed all right. Looks just like the one by the Quidditch pitch.*

And, he discovered when Ray unlatched the doors, it held the same selection of brooms. This time, though, there was no good-natured banter, no snatching for the best and newest models. Ray simply pulled out the brooms as they came to his hands, and the other students passed them back through the crowd in silence. Draco, at the back, got one of the first things Ray had grabbed, the same Nimbus Two Thousand he’d ridden earlier.

*Guess I didn’t damage it too badly, then.*

When everyone had a broom, Ray shut the doors of the shed. Draco turned to start back towards the place where he’d left Abby and Mum, and stared in surprise.

What had been a wooden floor was now a large, flat-bottomed ship. Poles with hand-size rings on their ends protruded from it all the way along both sides. A cabin in the center covered the crowd of younger children, around whom seats had formed and straps had been fastened. Professor Dumbledore sat in their midst, holding a misty-looking orb from which streamers of fog were beginning to extrude.

Professor McGonagall stood near the front of the ship with a group of fifth years around her, and Professor Riddle was at the back with the sixth years. All of them had their wands out, and one rather nervous-looking fifth year was watching Professor McGonagall demonstrate a wand movement for her.

“Malfoy, come on!” Harry shouted from the back of the ship.

Draco blinked and discovered he was standing alone near the broomshed. The other seventh years were attaching their brooms to the ringed poles and mounting up.

*Oh. That’s what they’re for.*

He quickly took the last available position, near the back on the right side of the ship. His

broom's handle fit the ring as if they'd been made for each other.

*Probably they were.*

A notch carved in the side of the ship proved to be at the perfect height to give him a leg up, and he felt the Cushioning Charm on the broom go active as he mounted. Abby looked over at him from her seat in the cabin and waved, and Draco freed a hand to wave back.

"All riders set?" Ray called from his place near the front of the ship.

"Set." "I'm good." "Ready to fly," the answers came back quickly.

"Bow stabilizers ready," Professor McGonagall reported crisply.

"Stern stabilizers ready," Professor Riddle echoed her.

"Open the door," Professor Dumbledore commanded.

Ray drew his wand and flicked it at the ceiling.

The ceiling ceased to exist. Above, Draco saw nothing but darkness, and a wave of cold rolled down over him.

*How many of them must there be?*

Professor Dumbledore tightened his hands around the ball he was holding and whispered something Draco didn't catch. Instantly, the ship was surrounded by thick silver fog, and the cold lifted.

"Boost on my mark," Professor Riddle said quietly. "In three... two... one..."

The fifth and sixth years all had their wands pointed over the side of the ship. "Impello!" they shouted together.

The ship shot upwards with a stomach-turning lurch.

"Brooms!" Professor McGonagall snapped out.

Draco leaned forward on his Nimbus, feeling it strain at the weight it was carrying. Slowly, so slowly, the ship began to ascend.

"I need your help now, little ones," Dumbledore said softly, his attention still on his orb. "Can you make me very happy, so that I can keep us all safe?"

"I can," said Marcus Black immediately. "But I need everybody to do it with me. Will you?"

A few of the children giggled; others looked puzzled, but they all nodded.

“Okay. It goes like this.” Marcus took a deep breath and began to sing, in a voice that sounded like a fight between a crup and a kneazle.

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, hoggy warty Hogwarts...”

Draco cracked up laughing. So did most of the other broom riders, along with all the stabilizers and everyone inside the cabin.

“Teach us something, please!” Marcus continued, several of the other young students catching their breaths enough to join him.

“That voice drives his mother mad,” Luna said from her place behind Draco. “She’s always telling him not to sing, and he always does anyway.”

“Whether we be old and bald or young with scabby knees...”

Nearly all the students in the cabin were singing now. Some of the stabilizers had joined in. Professor McGonagall’s face was a study in irritated patience, while Professor Riddle seemed to find the whole thing very funny.

“Our heads could do with filling with some interesting stuff...”

Professor Dumbledore was beaming, nodding his head in time, and the fog around the ship was glowing brighter silver every second.

“For now they’re bare and full of air, dead flies and bits of fluff...”

Draco arched his back, stretching. “Is someone steering this thing?” he asked Luna over his shoulder.

“So teach us things worth knowing!”

“It doesn’t need to be steered,” Luna said. “It only goes to one place.”

“Bring back what we’ve forgot!”

“I wonder where that could be,” Draco muttered.

“Just do your best, we’ll do the rest...”

The entire complement of the ship took a huge breath simultaneously.

*Oh, why not.* Draco took a breath of his own.

“And learn till our brains all rot!” he sang along.

The airship sailed on, carrying its precious cargo towards safety.

*“Hogwarts, Hogwarts, hoggy warty Hogwarts, teach us something please...”*

Professor McGonagall conjured herself a pair of earplugs.

## Be Careful 11: Who You Think About

Draco roused out of the trance-like state that long flights tended to induce in him. Someone was shaking his shoulder.

“I’m your relief,” Lyssa Potter said, holding out a gloved hand. “Come on in and warm up. Professor McGonagall’s got a fire going at the stern.”

“Thanks.” Draco took the proffered hand and swung himself aboard the ship, then supported Lyssa as she clambered out to the broom he’d just left. The fog was gone from around the ship, he noticed, and a half-moon was up, casting enough light to see their surrounding clearly.

*Not that there’s much to see. Clouds, clouds, and more clouds.*

Most of the passengers in the cabin were asleep, heads on one another’s shoulders or laps. Professor Dumbledore had leaned back in his chair and was snoring faintly, the milky-white orb still on his lap. The group at the front of the ship was smaller than it had been, and most of its members had been riding brooms when the ship launched. Now they held mugs with steam rising from them and talked quietly, watching cloud peaks slip past beneath the ship.

*I could use something to drink.*

Draco turned and headed for the back of the ship, the stern, where flickering firelight beckoned. The group back here was much larger, with Professors McGonagall and Riddle both present. She had a large pot in her hands and was pouring from it into the mugs the students held out for her, while he was sitting back by the railing with Ginny Weasley, who seemed upset about something.

*Not my problem.*

He tapped the shoulder of the first person who came to hand, which happened to be Neville. “Where do you get one of those?” he asked, pointing to the mug Neville was holding.

“Usually we conjure them. Saves washing up. But there should be a few spares around if you need them.”

“No, I can do that.” *I hope.*

Draco drew his wand and concentrated, sketching the outline of what he wanted in the air with the

wand's tip. A shiver ran through the air and through him, and then he was holding a blue-glazed mug in his left hand, the walls a touch uneven but still serviceable.

*What do you know. Practice does pay off after all.*

He joined the line snaking past the fire and watched as Ginny left Professor Riddle, only to be replaced by Meghan. Everyone was wearing winter cloaks—everyone including him, he discovered when he looked down. Someone must have conjured it onto him while he was flying.

“Wonder where the Patronus-stuff went,” he murmured half to himself.

“We don't need it when we're up this high,” Neenie answered, peering around Harry and Ron to see him. “Dementors float, but they can't fly. As long as we can get high enough off the ground, they can't get at us.” She laughed. “Some people think we should live on ships like this. Have our homes and our schools and... everything up here, and only go down to the ground if we have to.”

“Might be fun to start with,” Ron said, “but I'd get bored of it pretty fast.”

“Besides, the houses would have to be small to fit on the ship, and that means the rooms would be even smaller.” Harry stretched out his arms expressively. “I prefer my space, thanks.”

“Dementors are really that bad, then?” Draco asked. “That there's people seriously suggesting everyone should live where they can't come?”

“Oh, yes,” Ginny said from behind him. “That bad and worse.”

“Worse?”

Ray turned from where Professor McGonagall was pouring for him. “They shouldn't have been able to break our wards,” he said quietly. “There's a thousand years of magic in the Manor. A thousand years of love and friendship and happiness. Everything dementors hate. But they still got in.”

“And it's not your fault, either,” Hermione added, lowering her chin to glare at Draco.

“What? I didn't say—”

“You didn't have to. I know you were thinking it.”

Draco groaned. “You've known me a week and you can already read my mind?”

“Yes,” Hermione said simply.

“That's not fair.”

“Who said life was fair?” Ginny bumped Draco with her elbow. “Move up.”

Draco took a step forward, filling the place Ron had just vacated. His mind slipped back in the conversation, to what Hermione and Ray had said.

*She seems so sure I didn't give the dementors the opening they needed, but what else could have done it? What else changed in the last week that would have let them in against a thousand years of the stuff they hate?*

He snorted under his breath. *All right, I suppose it's a bit egotistic of me to think I'm Dark enough to let them in all by myself against that much Light magic. And Mum said that enough dementors in one place can make magic itself start to fail. They probably just threw warm bodies at the wards—or cold bodies, I don't think dementors are warm—until they got through. And once they were inside...*

A shudder ran through him that had nothing to do with the cold of the air here above the clouds. *If I hadn't stopped when I did, if I had decided it wasn't worth looking back, if I'd kept going...*

*Mum would have been the first one Kissed. He saw again her limp figure, the dementor's hands reaching out for her, lifting her towards its dark maw. They probably would have found me next, and the little kids upstairs. Another shiver, imagining darkness closing in around him to the sound of terrified wailing from the nursery. Then finally, when there were enough of them inside, they'd have gone after everyone in the ballroom...*

“A-hem,” said a familiar voice.

Draco looked up. He'd reached the front of the line without noticing it, and Professor McGonagall was holding her pot poised over his mug. “Coffee, tea, or hot chocolate?” she asked briskly.

“Hot chocolate, please.” Draco repositioned his hands on the mug as the liquid filled it. “Thank you, Professor.”

To his surprise, she smiled at him. “My pleasure, young man.”

*I guess being married loosened her up some...*

*Oh, no, not you again. Draco stepped aside to let Ginny have her turn and deliberately took a sip of the hot chocolate without blowing on it first, to let the pain in his mouth and throat supersede the mental images which were trying to take over his mind once more. This is not home, and Professor Riddle is not the Dark Lord.*

*But he is looking at me. And waving me over.*

Draco followed the beckoning hand and seated himself in the chair he'd seen Ginny and Meghan using earlier. “Yes, sir?”

“You seem troubled, Draco.”

Draco shrugged. “I'm all right, sir.”

“I understand.” Professor Riddle picked up his own mug from its place on the railing and sipped from it. “I just wanted you to know that I don’t only teach at Hogwarts. I also offer counsel to the students, if they need it or want it. Give them a fresh perspective on events, without them having to worry that their words will be repeated. Several people have asked to speak with me tonight, and I’m sure more will approach me when we arrive and they can do so without being watched. Since you hadn’t mentioned anyone at your Hogwarts who performs that function, I thought you might be unaware of it.” The mug went back in its place, into a circular cut-out on the railing which fit it perfectly. “So, now you’ve been told.”

*If there is such a thing as a tipping point for insanity, I believe I’ve just reached it. Excuse me while I execute a mad dance and scream at the top of my lungs.*

*Or perhaps I’ll just sit here and stare at my drink.*

“Draco?”

“I have Dark magic on me.” The words came more easily than he’d expected.

“Yes, I’d heard that, but not anything specific.”

“Mum told you?” Draco looked up to see Professor Riddle nodding. “She said it’d left a stain on my soul—that she and Aunt Andy could help me keep it from spreading, but not take it off all the way—and I was worried that...”

“That you might have contributed to the wards falling at Fidelus Manor?” Professor Riddle finished. “I hardly think so, not unless the magic has been active in the last week. If you feel comfortable letting me see it, I may be able to tell you that here and now.”

Draco took another sip of the hot chocolate, blowing on it this time, then set his mug down on the railing and pulled up his left sleeve. “Here it is,” he said.

*And now I know I’m mad. Showing the Dark Mark to Voldemort—or to the bloke who could have been Voldemort—and expecting him to... I don’t know, cure it? Take it off me? Or at least fix it so it doesn’t poison my magic forever.*

Professor Riddle pulled a pair of glasses from a pocket inside his cloak and put them on. Draco had to suppress a snicker as his mind supplied the image of the Dark Lord attempting to wear glasses.

*They’d fall off his face...*

“May I?” the Professor asked, his hand hovering over Draco’s arm.

“Yes, sir.” Draco crossed the fingers of his right hand behind his back. If the Mark started to hurt, if it changed color even a bit...

Professor Riddle’s fingertips touched the place on Draco’s skin where the snake emerged from the

skull's mouth.

Nothing happened.

“Odd,” Professor Riddle said absently, tilting his head to one side, then the other. “Very odd.”

“What is, sir?”

“Whoever laid this on you, and you notice I'm not asking, he's quite a good wizard. The craftsmanship in this spell is astounding. Evil, of course, but expertly put together.” Professor Riddle took his hand away and folded up his glasses, sliding them back where they'd come from. “It has not, by the way, been active in the last week, so I would say it and you are free from suspicion in the matter of the wards.”

A weight lifted from Draco's heart he hadn't known was there. “Thank you, sir.”

“You are quite welcome.” Professor Riddle sat back in his chair, his eyes unfocusing slightly as though he were thinking hard. “Strange,” he said half-audibly. “It looked familiar, somehow...”

Draco gulped.

*Don't say anything, his instincts hissed. He won't thank you for it. Just let him keep wondering, and you keep quiet!*

*He deserves to know, said a more reasonable-sounding voice. And he might be able to get it off better if he knew exactly who put it on.*

Draco picked up his mug again, using both hands to keep it from spilling onto his lap. “Professor,” he said. “There is one thing I think I ought to tell you.”

---

Tom Riddle stood at the prow of the ship, staring ahead into the distance. He'd laid a Zoned Silencer around himself, then cut down the shielding spells to let a bit of wind through, enough to push his hair back from his face, ostensibly enough to make his eyes water. As cover stories went, it would do.

Footsteps beside him, and Minerva was there, looking out over the clouds even as he was. “I've warded them all to keep them safely aboard,” she said, the wind carrying her words to him on a small side-eddy. “With the extra spell Cecy told me about on our traveler, to be sure he doesn't enter dream state by accident. He may not be as rested as the others when we arrive, but we can't risk him slipping across the worlds at this point.”

“Of course not.” The normality of his voice surprised him. He had expected a harsh croak, or perhaps a smooth and icy tenor with a hint of a hiss about it.

Minerva's eyes darted to him for a second, then returned to their former place. “He's told you,

then.”

“Yes.” Tom bit the final consonant off, painfully short. “And you already knew.”

“Cecy told me what she suspected. Neither of us knew for certain.”

“Now you do.” He dared not look at her, or over his shoulder at the main body of the ship where a blond boy slept in a cabin seat, a brown-haired girl asleep on his lap and a blond woman resting her head on his shoulder. “Now I do.”

“Tom.” Her voice commanded his attention as surely as it did for any of her students, and he turned to look at her. Her profile and hair gleamed silver in the moonlight, and the lenses of her glasses flashed briefly opaque before revealing her eyes again, fixed on his. “You are not he.”

“I could have been.”

“But you are not.” Each word was carefully and separately pronounced. “You have made your choices. They have led to this man you are. He made his choices, and they took him down a path very far from yours.”

“Is it?” Tom lifted his hands and regarded them, thinking of the memories Draco had allowed him to see. What would it be like to have fingers so long, skin so pale, a face out of nightmare and a snake’s eyes, a mind that thought of nothing but its enemies’ downfall and a heart—

Two smaller hands closed around his. “Do you consider me a fool, Tom Riddle?” Minerva asked in a tone that informed him he’d better give her the right answer.

“No.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.” Minerva closed the distance between them, still holding his hands in hers. “Consider, then, that I married you. That I bore your child. That I continue to put up with you year after year—fifty of them, in fact, this coming fourth of October.”

Tom smiled in spite of himself. ““Since I know men often have trouble recalling important dates,”” he quoted, ““I think we should be married on my birthday. It will give you twice the chance of remembering.’”

“And you have remembered. Every year.” Minerva released the grip of her right hand to reach up and brush a piece of hair out of Tom’s eyes. “Occasionally you’ve needed a little help, but you have remembered.”

Tom reached up and caught her hand, returning it to its partner between them. “Because I knew what you would do to me if I dared to forget.”

“Oh, nonsense. I like your company too much to exile you to the couch for more than a week. Or perhaps two.”

“I was referring to your habit of docking Slytherin exactly as many points as I give them on any particular day.”

“Really, now. I’ve only done that once or twice.”

“A year.” Tom disengaged his left hand to slide that arm around his wife’s shoulders. “But I daresay they always deserve it.”

“Indeed they do.” Minerva settled herself next to him. “Indeed they do.”

They stood in silent companionship and watched as the clouds broke ahead to reveal the stone towers of their home on the distant horizon.

## **Be Careful**

### **12: Where You Fall Asleep**

Draco climbed awkwardly through the round hole in the wall, cursing under his breath as his foot got caught.

*No wonder Gryffindors are always in shape. Getting out of their bloody Tower in the morning is a workout all by itself.*

Not terribly to his surprise, Hogwarts looked much the same as it always had. The biggest difference he'd seen so far were the extra dorms in each common room set aside for "visitors".

*I don't know how they decide who sleeps where. Maybe just by last name.*

However it was done, Abby had been sent to a bed in Gryffindor Tower, and had insisted Draco take her there and tuck her in. He'd expected some ribbing from the other boys, but only Ray had really seemed to notice, and that because Neenie'd teased him about being supplanted.

*Of course, what with Ron lining up the first and second years by House and Harry taking little Callie down to the nursery to change her nappy before bed, I've got plenty of company. And Ray had his hands full when Nicki decided she wanted Mummy, right now, no arguments...*

But that was past, and Abby was safely tucked into her bed and dreaming. Whimsically, Draco wondered if she'd dream of his own world.

*I hope not. She deserves better.*

He hid a yawn behind one hand. The nap on the skyship didn't seem to have had much effect, and he was ready for some real sleep.

"Only question is, where?" he murmured, surveying the half-familiar corridor.

"Where what?" said a voice behind him.

Draco turned. A fat lady dressed in pink was eyeing him from the portrait which had swung shut over Gryffindor Tower's entrance. "Just trying to figure out where I should go to sleep," he said.

"Well, what House are you in?"

“Slytherin.”

“Then go to your dormitory. Honestly.” The portrait tutted. “Young men these days... sometimes I wonder.”

*Thank you, Lady of Unhelpful Advice.*

*But it's a place to start. Ray'll probably be down there, and Mum. They can point me in the right direction.*

“Thanks,” he said aloud, and turned to find a staircase.

*And here we have the other part of the reason Gryffindors are in shape. Stairs. Lots and lots of stairs.*

Navigating the switchbacks and secret passages with only a fraction of his attention, Draco let his thoughts wander.

*Four Houses, four Founders, but Slytherin doesn't seem to be quite the pariah it is back home. Maybe because these Slytherins aren't, oh, evil. They want power, but most of them seem to care about how they use it. They sneak and they scheme, but they do it because they think what they're after is right.*

A tapestry of trolls in tutus went by on his left.

*Of course, the Dark Lord thinks what he's doing is right too. He thinks the world would be better off with the Mudbloods and the blood traitors put in their place, and only the people who have the proper breeding running things...*

*Or does he?*

If “Tom Marvolo Riddle” had once been the name of Lord Voldemort, if that part of the stories were true, then there was no reason the rest of them shouldn't be. No reason that Lord Voldemort, the greatest hope of the pureblood world, the darling of all who believed wizardkind to be the nobility that nature herself had set over the lesser beings of the Muggle race, couldn't secretly be...

*A half-blood.*

Draco jumped the vanishing step without thinking about it.

*There's no pureblood Riddle family in Britain, that's for sure. And it doesn't sound like a name that would come from anywhere else. Not unless it was translated... no, that doesn't make sense either.*

He wasn't sure whether or not he liked what he was thinking of, but he couldn't seem to stop.

*It makes sense of him changing his name. He wouldn't want to keep a Muggle name. Not with what he believed. And... wait. Weren't there those old rituals, the kind of magic Mother never wanted me studying and Father would sneak me books on, that would make you technically pureblood even if your parents were dentists or greengrocers?*

A one-eyed, humpbacked witch seemed to leer at him as he passed her.

*You'd have to swear that your Muggle relatives meant nothing to you, that the magical world is the only world you care about... and then kill them all, everyone related to you in the first or second degree who's a Muggle. Your parents, brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles or cousins, and grandparents. With your own hands, your own magic. And enjoy it.*

*If that's what it takes to be evil, then maybe I want to be good after all.*

Draco turned a corner and tripped over a bump in the carpet, falling headlong but catching himself on his hands.

*No, that's not a bump. Somebody left their snakeskin bag here.*

His eyes traveled down the corridor—

*Their very, very long snakeskin bag.*

—then snapped back to what he'd tripped on.

*Their moving snakeskin bag.*

*And something is hissing around that corner right there...*

“Who's that?” called a man's voice.

“Just me,” Draco called back, shoving himself upright and administering a mental slap for being an idiot. *Parselmouths, remember? There's bound to be a snake or two around. As long as they don't eat me, I think I can handle it.*

Professor Riddle came around the corner at the same moment as the head of the snake. The head was decidedly the larger of the two.

Draco swallowed surreptitiously. *I was never the greatest in Care of Magical Creatures, but I think this just might be a basilisk...*

But the tips of the fangs protruding from the green-scaled mouth glinted silver in the light of the wall-mounted torches, and the sunken places on the snake's head where its eyes should have been were scaled over.

*So it's a tame basilisk.*

*Marvelous. Just what I needed to cap off this day.*

“Draco, meet Sangre,” Professor Riddle said, stroking the basilisk’s cheek. “She’s one of our castle guards, and a fine storyteller as well.”

“Er.” How did one shake hands with a snake? “Pleased to meet you,” Draco said, settling for a bow.

Professor Riddle turned to the snake and spoke a few sibilant sentences, which Draco took to be the reverse of the introduction in Parseltongue. The snake replied, its—her—tongue flicking in and out once.

“She wants to get your scent, so she knows that you belong here,” Professor Riddle translated. “Hold out your hand—she won’t hurt you.”

Draco told his nerves to take a flying leap without a broomstick and extended his left hand to the basilisk. Her forked tongue flickered out again, touching his skin, then went back into her mouth, and a long sigh emerged.

“She likes you,” Professor Riddle said, smiling.

“I... wish I could say the same.” Draco edged along the wall, pushing back panic as Sangre’s head turned to track him.

“I am sorry, Draco, I forget not everyone is as comfortable as I am around snakes.” Professor Riddle stepped between Draco and Sangre, laid his hand against the snake’s nose, and hissed two or three words at her. She butted her head gently against his shoulder, knocking him back a pace, then turned and slithered off the way Draco had come.

“You’d mentioned some trouble at your Hogwarts with the Chamber of Secrets?” Professor Riddle asked, starting down the opposite hallway.

“Yeah. Someone was letting out a basilisk. It never killed anyone, mostly through luck. Is that...”

“Yes, she is.” Professor Riddle set a fast pace, enough so that Draco had to half-trot to keep up. “I found her when I was fourteen, poking around an old bathroom with some friends. She was half-starved and very confused—she’d hibernated for over nine hundred years, and didn’t understand why her master hadn’t come back to wake her the way he’d promised...”

“He is this way!” insisted a childish voice nearby. “I heard him talking to Sangre!”

“We’ll look around two more corners,” said a woman’s voice, strangely familiar to Draco’s ears. “But then we need to go back to bed—it’s very late—”

A little girl poked her black-haired head around the corner and squealed at the sight of Professor Riddle. “Granddad!”

“Diana!” Professor Riddle took three steps and scooped the girl up. “What are you doing here? Is your mummy all right?”

Diana bounced in her grandfather’s arms. “The baby’s coming!” she announced happily. “The baby’s coming and Daddy had to take Mummy to hospital so he was going to take me and Paul to Fidelus Manor ’cause Uncle Sirius and Auntie Letha are there but the Floo just sent us back home when we tried to go there so he took us here instead and we saw Gran and told her already and can Sangre tell me a bedtime story please?”

“No, Sangre will tell you a good morning story tomorrow,” said Professor Riddle, setting Diana on the ground to accept a littler boy from the arms of a bespectacled woman in a nurse’s uniform. “Thank you, Myrtle, I’ll bring them back in a few minutes...”

*Myrtle?* Draco stepped back against the wall. *Oh, no, please...*

Then he got a good look at her face.

*Sure enough. No mistaking that expression.*

“Sir,” he said, fighting the urge to giggle insanely or run away screaming.

“Yes?” Professor Riddle turned towards Draco.

“Where am I sleeping? Down in the Slytherin dorms?”

“No, you and Cecy have a guest suite. You’ll be in the dorms when you come to school, but not tonight. It’s near there, though, and she’ll be looking out for you. I assume you can get to the dorms on your own?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then it’s the second corner to your left and straight on till the end of the hall.”

Draco got a sense of ‘missed joke’ about this but let it pass. “Thank you, sir. Good night.”

“Good night, Draco. Sleep well.” Professor Riddle turned back to hear what his grandson was saying to him.

*Grandson. And granddaughter. And Moaning Myrtle.* Draco slipped past the lady in question and got a smile and nod from her. *I guess she grew out of the Moaning bit, when she had a chance to grow up at all...*

*If I don’t get some sleep soon, my mind is going to fall apart.*

Luckily, he wasn’t far above the dungeons now, and his feet could have taken him to the Slytherin dorms in pitch blackness. He kept walking past the entrance, took the second left, and saw a gleam of light at the end of the hallway.

*There are rooms down here, back at the other Hogwarts. I just never knew what they were for.*

“There you are,” Mum said as he came in. “Did you get lost, or just delayed?”

“A little of both.” Draco yawned profoundly. “I don’t know why I’m so tired,” he said on the end of it. “I slept on the ship...”

“We were all bespelled not to sleep deeply,” said Mum, folding back the duvet on one of the two twin beds. “There have been sleepwalking incidents aboard skyships before. They ended badly.”

*A few thousand feet up in the air... yeah, that would be pretty bad.* “Well, we’re not on a skyship now. And I am about to fall over.” Draco suited action to word on the other bed. “Should I just sleep in my robes, or can you conjure your widdle baby boy somefink else?”

Mum gave him a cool look, then swirled her wand three times in his direction. His robes vanished, and loosely-woven green pajamas took their place.

“Oi! I haven’t worn anything like this since I was three!”

“As you behave, so you will be treated.” A reverse flick restored the missing clothing. “Sleep in your robes for tonight. The house-elves will find us fresh ones for tomorrow.”

“Right.” Draco fumbled in his pocket for his wand and pointed it at his mouth. “Scourgificus menthae.” The film coating his teeth and tongue vanished, and he licked his lips at the taste of peppermint, then tucked his wand away again and looked up with his eyes innocently wide. “I’m ready for my bedtime story now, Mummy.”

Mum began to lift her wand in his direction.

“I didn’t mean that.” Draco scrambled under the covers and pretended to cower. “I’m good. See how good I am. I’m asleep, that’s how good I am.” He shut his eyes and began to snore.

Mum’s light chuckle drifted across his ears, followed by a whispered incantation. Draco considered opening his eyes to see if anything about him had changed, but sleep decided the question for him.

He could investigate in the morning.

---

Cecy watched from her own bed as Draco vanished, the covers falling to the mattress where he had lain only a moment before.

*I knew it would happen. I made preparations for it. Why does it still hurt so much?*

*Perhaps because it reminds me that when all is said and done, I have only borrowed another woman’s child.*

She waved her wand at the candle in the corner, snuffing it, then lay down and buried her face in the pillow.

*Why, my love, why? Why forever keep faithful to one who never loved you in that way? Why will you never take notice of me? I am here, waiting...*

In the hall, footsteps passed by, the confident tread of a man secure in his own place in the world.

Cecy pressed her face harder into the pillow, that he might not hear her cry.

---

Draco dreamed.

He was walking up and down the halls of Hogwarts, an empty and deserted Hogwarts. No one was in sight—Mum hadn't been in her bed beside his, the dorms were bare and cold, even the ghosts seemed to have vanished. Out on the lawn beside the lake stood a white marble tomb, the image of the one he'd heard stories about from the other students back home...

*No, he thought hazily, that was just a dream. Silly dream. Why would Lord Albus be dead? He may be old, but he's still strong. Besides, he has Fawkes to heal him from anything that could hurt him.*

There were still house-elves in the kitchens, though. There were always house-elves in the kitchens. They seemed surprised to see him, but made him up a plate anyway, and he took it outside to eat by the lake, where he could skip rocks and watch the thestrals circling above the Forest.

*I never saw them before. Maybe I can only see them in my dreams. That makes sense—the only place I've seen someone die is in my dreams. The night I dreamed I saw Professor Snape kill Lord Albus. It was awful, but Mum made me feel better afterwards. She does that.*

When he was finished eating, he left the plate on a rock by the lake and wandered aimlessly about the grounds for a while, until he started to feel sleepy again. His feet took him back towards the castle without his thinking about it much. He'd find his bed again and sleep, and Mum would wake him in time for breakfast.

He'd come in the back way, and was just crossing the entrance hall to the dungeon stairs when he heard the voices.

“—would he be here?”

“I have no idea, but this is where the Dark Lord says he has sensed him. Spread out. Search everywhere.”

Draco nipped behind a statue and peered around the plinth as three people came in through the great oak doors.

*I know them. Two of them just from the dreams, Marrow or Harrow or something. But there's no mistaking him. He made a face at the dark, slick hair and beak-like nose of Severus Snape. As much as I might want to.*

*I wonder who they're looking for?*

The witch snickered. "Have you ever seen anything so touching as Lucius with his precious son missing?" she asked. "Pacing about the house like a caged quintaped. And Narcissa sniveling in the drawing room when she thinks no one's listening."

*Lucius—Narcissa—wait a moment—*

Dream and reality did an acrobatic act within Draco's mind, and he bit down on a loose mouthful of his robes to keep from shouting.

*It's me. They're looking for me. I've gone missing somehow. But a dream couldn't do that—unless I was sleepwalking again—*

He glanced upwards at the high ceiling above.

*I don't think I could sleepwalk to Hogwarts. Not without someone seeing me, at any rate.*

*Something very strange is going on here...*

## Be Careful 13: Who You Defy

Draco watched Snape and the Carrows walking around the entrance hall, peering behind statues and tapping on panelling. *So they're here looking for me. Why don't I just go with them?*

*Maybe because I don't want to get dragged home like a little kid who ran away with a rucksack. But it's going to happen unless I do something fast. They're almost over here already.*

A thought occurred to him. He drew his wand and aimed it carefully at the top of the staircase.

*Have to get the timing just right on this one...*

---

“Look!” shouted Amycus, pointing to the balustrade. “There he goes!”

A shadowy, robed figure fled into the darkness of the first floor hallway.

“Come back, you stupid boy!” Alecto dashed up the marble stairs, her robes flying out behind her. “We’re trying to help you!”

Severus started to follow Amycus upwards, then slowed, letting the siblings get ahead of him.

*They are eager for their glory. Perhaps a bit too eager.*

*Let me take one more look at what we are leaving behind...*

From this angle, Severus discovered, the black robes and pale hair which had been hidden at floor level were plainly visible. As he watched from the corner of his eye, the boy slipped out from behind the artist’s rendering of Salazar Slytherin and his two sons and darted across to the kitchen corridor.

*He seems well and whole. Well enough, certainly, to send us chasing after a wild Fwooper.*

*But I should still follow him to be sure of where he is going.*

The portrait of the fruit bowl was still quivering when Severus arrived, and the flames in the kitchen fireplace had not lost their last traces of green. The house-elves all contrived to look very busy indeed.

“Did he return home, or go to some other place?” Severus asked the air.

“Home, sir,” murmured several small diffident voices.

“Very good.” Severus turned and left the kitchens. They had accomplished their mission; there was no reason to let the Carrows run loose in Hogwarts any longer than necessary.

*Though ‘necessary’ is a flexible concept at the moment, considering I will soon be dealing with them here for a full year or more.*

He bared his teeth momentarily in annoyance at the thought, then set it aside. The reality would come when it came, and no amount of brooding would change it.

*And I shall have this—that a mere child fooled them into chasing after an illusory figure—to keep them in line, along with the other information the Dark Lord has already given me.*

The day looked brighter already.

---

Draco stumbled out of Malfoy Manor’s main fireplace, spitting soot.

*Forgot rule one about Floo travel. He dropped into a chair and fumbled in his pocket for a handkerchief. Never, ever, ever inhale. Ptah.*

A vigorous coughing fit later, he looked up to discover both elder Malfoys staring at him. A moment of panic gave way to inspiration.

*No one saw me—they can’t prove anything...*

“What?” he demanded, folding the handkerchief over and using it to wipe the rest of the ashes off his face. “I’m not even allowed to go for a walk in the morning without telling you?”

“A walk is one thing,” Lucius said, arms folded. “Leaving the house and the grounds, without permission—”

“What do I need your permission for? I’m of age! I can do what I like!”

“While you live under my roof—”

Draco snorted. “Your roof? That’s a good one. You wouldn’t even be here if the Dark Lord hadn’t decided he wanted you to see me get punished. All he has to do is decide you’re not useful anymore, and you’re gone. I wouldn’t be giving orders around here if I were you.”

Narcissa glanced at Lucius, whose sallow face had gone a peculiar shade of green. “We were worried about you, Draco,” she said pleadingly. “All we want is for you to be safe.”

“All you want?” Draco stood up, shoving his chair backwards across the room. “Are you sure?”

Maybe you should have thought about that a few years ago. When it actually could have done some good.”

Narcissa’s hand flew to her throat, as though he’d struck her.

“I’m going upstairs.” Draco stormed across the room and pushed between his parents.

Lucius’ hand snapped down and grasped his wrist.

“Let go of me!”

“You will listen first.” Lucius tightened his grip as Draco tried to pull free. “I will not have you frightening your mother like this.”

“She was the only one frightened, was she?”

“Do not push me, boy, I am very near my limit.” Lucius’ fingers hadn’t lost their knack of finding the most painful places to dig in. “As I was saying. This is twice you have disappeared from a place you ought to have been sleeping and reappeared, unaccountably, somewhere else. I do not know if it is sleepwalking or a practical joke you are attempting to play, but it ends now. Before you go to bed tonight, you will take a Dreamless Sleep potion, and the same for every night hereafter.”

Draco’s heart flipped over, as if he’d missed not only the vanishing step but an entire flight of them. *No—no—he can’t—*

“You can’t make me,” he said, but even to his own ears the words sounded feeble.

“I have ways.” Lucius released Draco’s wrist. “Now, go to your room.”

“Make me,” Draco sneered.

Lucius’ fist smashed into his right cheekbone.

Draco staggered backwards and fell to the floor, the impact sending another shock of pain through his face.

Lucius came forward step by step until he towered over Draco. Narcissa was a white-faced presence at his elbow. “I said,” he repeated precisely, “go to your room. Now.”

Slowly, Draco got to his feet, the right side of his face throbbing. He dared not speak, but something told him that if he gave in now, if he obeyed this command, he would be giving in and obeying for the rest of his life.

He looked from one to the other of his parents—

*No. They’re not my parents.*

*Not anymore. Not after this.*

*Especially not now that I know what parents should be like.*

The man and woman standing in front of him were jailors, nothing more. He would obey them because he had no choice, not because it was some sacred filial duty. He might still pretend to be their son, but that was all it would ever be, a pretense.

*And all pretenses fail, sooner or later.*

Draco inclined his head coolly to Lucius, then turned and began to climb the stairs. Behind him, he heard Narcissa's first choked-off sob.

He did not look back.

---

"You're sure these are his," Ray said to Neenie, looking down at the pile of black cloth.

"Positive. Echo found them for me." The oldest daughter of Dobby and Winky was widely acknowledged to be the real mistress of Fidelus Manor. "He just wore them yesterday."

"All right. I trust Echo."

"And you don't trust me?" Hermione huffed.

"I didn't say that."

"You were thinking it."

"Isn't it nice being a twin, they say," Ray muttered, waving his wand around the crumpled robes and the freshly written note lying on the workbench. "Isn't it nice always having someone else around to talk to..."

A bit of magic he'd almost missed was flung back into his spell pattern. "Isn't it nice having someone there to clean up your messes," Neenie said tartly, dipping her wand's tip into his space and coming up with several loops on its end.

"Stop that, you don't know what you're..." Ray trailed off as Neenie drew a perfect third-level rune for speech in the air, leaving every thread precisely where it was meant to be. "All right, maybe you do."

"I always know what I'm doing," Neenie said, starting the rune for 'far away' down and to the left of the 'speech' rune. "I may get distracted at times, but I always come back to it in the end."

"As much as some of us wish you wouldn't." Ray added two interlinked runes, one for 'time' and the other for 'change', at the opposite corner from the one where Hermione was working. Finally, he brought his wand down to first the note, then the robes, linking them both to the pattern, as his

twin sketched the rune for ‘journey’ at the final corner.

Free hands met in the air above the spell.

**Ready?**

**Let’s go.**

Two wands touched two lines in the pattern.

The spell sprang to life.

---

Draco had finished with his first reaction—a fit of temper, involving shouting himself hoarse (which hurt his developing bruise, but he didn’t care) and hurling loose objects about the room—and was now well into his second, which seemed to consist mostly of denying he wanted to fling himself across the bed and cry until his mum came to comfort him.

*Because she won’t.*

*She can’t.*

*I’m never going to see her, or Abby, or Ray and Neenie, or Moony and Danger, or any of them. Not ever again.*

*I’ll never have a class with Professor Riddle, or know if his new grandchild was a boy or a girl. Or Danger’s baby, come to think. And I never did find out who Mum was in love with.*

At any other time, he’d have been laughing at the absurdity of his words, but at this moment he was too miserable to care.

*I finally found what I thought I’d never have. What I wasn’t even supposed to want. A place to be happy, and people who cared about me. Maybe they were imaginary—I’m not so sure anymore—but they were real enough for me to care back. Real enough for me to...*

He might as well say it. It was true.

*Real enough for me to love them. As much as I can love. As much as I know how.*

*I suppose I won’t ever learn any better, now.*

Draco slid to the floor, his back against the bed, staring at the door. He’d heard the key in the lock almost as soon as he’d closed it behind himself, and he knew Malfoy Manor locks from of old. They were specifically designed to punish anyone who tried using magic to undo them.

*I don’t know why I was surprised. I said it myself. They’re not my parents now, they’re my jailors. I wasn’t even thinking of them as my mother and father—it was as if we weren’t related at*

*all...*

“At least I moved,” he said under his breath. “Be a little much to get locked up in my old nursery.” A difference between that room and this occurred to him. “What’re they going to do about...”

With a small pop, a tray materialized in the corner of the room. On it were a covered plate, a china pitcher and an earthenware pot with a lid, a flask of potion, and a note.

*They thought to send me a chamber pot. How nice of them.*

Feeling lazy, Draco drew his wand and Summoned the note.

*My son, it read in Narcissa’s flowing curlicues. These things will supply your needs until I can bring your father to see reason. Please, do not anger him again. He has enough troubles in his life without one of the people he should be able to trust turning on him.*

Draco scowled. “Like there was ever trust in this house.”

*I warn you that the flask is enchanted. Its contents must be drunk by the time the sun has set, or they will be magically transferred into your body by means less pleasant.*

“What’s it going to do, shove the stuff up my—never mind, I don’t want to know.” Draco kept reading half-heartedly, until the next sentence made him sit up straight.

*I have had news since this morning which makes me think it is possible you may be able to return to school this September. I beg of you, Draco, do nothing which may place this chance in jeopardy. With it lies your last hope for a life beyond that for which I now see you are ill-suited.*

“Oh, you see that now, do you? Nice of you to admit it.”

*With all my love, your mother*

Draco crumpled the note into a ball and flung it aside. “All your love,” he said savagely. “For all the bloody good it does. All the good it’s ever done me, my whole life. And then in one week—one week—you hear me?” He was on his feet, shouting at the closed door, bellowing at the top of his lungs. “One week! One bloody week and I know more about love than you taught me in seventeen years!”

He sank to the floor again. His face stabbed with pain, his throat felt seared and raw, and his whole body was shaking with reaction.

*One week to be happy, and now it’s over. If I can bring myself to suck up enough, maybe I get to go back to school for another year, and watch everybody avoid me like dragon pox. If not... this is it. These four walls, or some other set. Forever.*

His vision clouded over. He let it. There was no one here to see.

Unnoticed, a ghostlike wisp of paper drifted to the floor beside Draco.

It had come a long way. It could afford to wait a few minutes.

## Be Careful 14: How You Begin

Draco used his handkerchief one last time, then tossed it into the laundry hamper.

*They'll probably put a spell on that eventually too. Make it so they don't have to come in here for anything.*

He stood up and crossed to his desk, pulling out his favorite quill and a fresh scroll of parchment. The sooner he started recording the details of his dream, the less he'd lose.

*Count my blessings. They could have put me downstairs in the dark, or taken away my writing things, or even decided they had to send me out of the country. Wouldn't that be lovely—stuck on a train for hours, knowing every second I'm forgetting things I'll never get back...*

Dipping his quill, he considered how to begin.

*"Once upon a time" seems about right. Or it would, if I were sure a dream was all this was—*

Draco bit his lip sharply to cut off this line of thought. He had to keep believing it had been only a dream. A dream that made him walk in his sleep, perhaps, but still a dream.

*I can live through losing a dream. It's happened before.*

*I can't live through losing a world.*

*Especially not a world like that.*

The ink had dried on his quill's tip while he thought. He dipped it again and set to work.

*Once upon a time, in a world both very like and very unlike mine, I met people who looked like my enemies but became my friends...*

---

In the Hogwarts library, Cecy pored over a scroll she had stretched out on the table in front of her, making notes in a second scroll beside her. Occasionally, she consulted the Latin dictionary on her other side.

"Aunt Cecy?" said a small, forlorn voice from beside her.

“Hello, Abby.” Cecy smiled at the girl, pretending not to notice the tearmarks on her cheeks. “Come to help me?”

“Maybe.” Abby sat down on the chair beside Cecy. “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at a prophecy, a very old prophecy. Come to think of it, you should be able to help me. It belongs to your family, after all.”

“Oh.” Abby scooted her chair closer to the table. “I do know about that one. Salazar Slytherin’s granddaughter gave it to us, the day she married the first Beauvoi ever to have magic. Mum used to tell it to us in bedtime stories, but it’s complicated and all I can ever remember is something about a serpent and darkness getting sealed away.”

“Which is why I have it written down.” Cecy pulled the scroll closer to Abby. “Will you read it for me once? I might understand a bit better if I hear it in another voice than my own.”

Abby leaned forward and began to read. Cecy half-shut her eyes, listening to the girl speak.

“When darkness shall be master of the night, then await the serpent who comes forth from faithless light and reflected shadow. He shall despair four times: the first, let him be rescued; the second, let him have help; the third, let him rescue himself; the fourth, let him rescue all. For on that day when the serpent flees with two others, and sees that his warrior foe ends the flight, the darkness shall be struck a blow; and on that day when the ruthless one accepts the gift of the serpent, the gift of new life with no sight, the darkness shall be driven back; and on that day when the argent orb becomes forsworn, the darkness shall be sealed away, and sealed away it shall remain as long as faith is broken.”

*Ah-ha. Cecy made a notation on her scroll. Encouraging and discouraging at the same time, like every other clue I’ve found. Everything I can interpret here seems to point to my Draco being the one we’ve been waiting for—*

*And I felt the link I had laid on him shatter not ten minutes after I lay down to sleep. I cannot track him in his own world, and he may not think to connect the place he lies down with the place he wakes up. If he sleeps at his home without protection—if he wakes to Fidelus Manor as it now is—*

She shuddered, unable to stop herself imagining. Draco would awaken, likely pleased to find himself back in his “dream”. He would take a change of clothes from the wardrobe and open the door of his bedroom, perhaps calling out for her as he did, to tell her he had returned.

*But I will not be there. And those who will, will give him a very different greeting.*

Her mind painted a vivid picture of Draco blanching at the sight of those who now inhabited Fidelus Manor. He would back up, dropping his robes to the floor—the dementors would come gliding forward, letting their inherent darkness block the morning sun, their chill steal the warmth and life from the air—Draco might try to cast a Patronus, but alone against so many, what chance

did he have?

*None. He has no chance. And when his Patronus fails, they will Kiss him. They will drag his soul from his living body and turn him into a mindless monster whose only knowledge is hunger for the light, whose only ambition is to spread darkness wider and ever wider.*

*I would rather he stayed in his own world forever than that.*

“Is Draco the serpent?” Abby asked, peering at the top of the prophecy. “I thought it meant dragon.”

Cecy shook off her dark mood. “It means both,” she said, rolling her right wrist in a circle to relieve the tension it had been under while she wrote. “The constellation called Draco looks like a great snake. And he’s also a Slytherin, if not a descendant like you.”

Abby grinned for a moment, then returned to business. “It says he has to despair four times,” she said, tapping the words. “He already has once, before he first came to us. That was part of why I screamed when I saw him, because there was so much hurt all through him.”

“And that would have been the time he was rescued.” Cecy followed the line along the parchment. “Abby, I think you may have something there. If this is the second time Draco will despair, then he will need help to find his way back to us.”

“But how can we send him help if we don’t know where he is?” Abby demanded.

Cecy smiled. “We have things of his,” she said. “Objects he has handled, clothes he has worn. With the proper magic, we can use those to find him no matter where he has gone. We may not be able to bring him back to us in that way, but we can send him a message...”

“Someone beat you to it,” said Danger, stepping out from between the bookshelves.

“Mummy!” Abby launched herself from her chair.

“Easy, love.” Danger sidestepped her daughter’s leap and caught her with one arm as she landed, hugging her close. “Yes, I’m here, I’m all right. Daddy too, he’s coming. It may be a miracle, Cecy,” she added over Abby’s head. “Everyone got out. No one Kissed. I don’t think that’s ever happened before in a home where the wards went down.”

“I think you may be right.” Cecy stood up with a smile as a weary-looking Remus appeared behind his wife. “Are you the last ones in, then?”

“As is traditional for the hosts,” Remus said, bending to hug Abby rather than lifting her up, though she pouted. “I’m sorry, Joy, but I’ve been working hard tonight, and I’m tired.”

Abby nodded in understanding. “Is it true, what Mother said?” she asked. “Nobody got Kissed at all?”

“My word’s not good enough for you?” Danger stuck her nose in the air. “I think I’m offended.”

Abby made a face at her mother. “Is it?” she asked Remus. “Please?”

“It is.” Remus caressed his daughter’s hair. “Everyone who was at the ball is safe now. Most of them decided to come here with us rather than risk going home. Andy’s downstairs with Ted, and would like to see you before you turn in,” he said to Cecy. “And I’m sure I’ve seen Dora and her Charlie around here somewhere, but I can’t seem to recall where.”

“They’ll turn up. What were you saying, Danger, about someone beating us to sending Draco a message?”

“Oh yes.” Danger’s smile was equal parts pride and exasperation. “We found our two eldest children in one of the fifth floor workrooms, flat on their backs recovering from an unexpected power drain. The place stank of magic, and not any spell either of us recognize, not even close. On the workbench was a set of black robes which Remus says are Draco’s, and this.”

“What is it?” Abby asked, looking closely at the translucent white object floating at the end of her mother’s wand.

“It’s a sheet of parchment,” said Remus. “Or to be more precise, half a sheet of parchment. As in, one half in our world, one half in Draco’s. How they managed it I have no idea, and judging by the results to the twins, I’m not sure I want to. They’ll sleep very well for the rest of tonight, and probably far into the morning.”

“There’s no indication Draco’s got the message they sent, though,” Danger said with a sigh. “I do hope they didn’t make a mistake, send it to the wrong world or the wrong person—it would be such a shame if they’d worked out that spell and drained themselves casting it for nothing...”

“They didn’t,” Abby said firmly. “Draco’s just busy and didn’t see the letter yet. He’ll get it soon.”

“He had better,” said Cecy, clearing her materials from the table so that Danger could lay the message down on it. “I may be wrong, I’m no theoretician, but that looks to me like an unstable casting. Necessary, for this kind of first-time work, but by its very nature prone to failure. If the spell should come undone before Draco can see it...”

Three adults and one young girl gathered around the library table to wait.

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*...why everyone has such big families, unless it’s because there wasn’t a war, just the Troubles, which I never did get a good definition for but apparently they were war-like, happened around the time of the first war with the Dark Lord, and involved blood purity. “The last hurrah of the fanatics,” Mum called them. I’m glad I never told her what I used to be like about blood. Then again, she probably already knew.*

Draco set down his quill and began to stretch his writing hand. “It really is ‘used to be like,’” he said conversationally, massaging his aching fingers. “Isn’t it stupid, that I can stop believing something that was supposed to be so central to my life just like that?” He snapped the fingers of his left hand. “Maybe it’s because I always secretly knew all the stuff about blood was rot. I just never let myself think about it out in the open until this happened.”

*And maybe it’s stupid to be talking like there’s someone else here, but if I keep it all in my head I’ll scream, and no one’s around to laugh at me or call me crazy.*

*Though I probably will be, if I stay here too long. Cooped up in one room, wanting a dream I can’t have...*

Draco shoved his chair noisily back from the desk and got up. A gleam of white on the floor by the bed caught his eye—he must have dropped a piece of parchment off the desk while he was rummaging for supplies.

*But how did it get all the way over there? And what’s that written on it?*

Curious, he went over to pick it up.

His fingers passed through it.

Draco sat down hard beside the parchment, staring at it.

*It is there. Really and truly there. I just can’t touch it.*

*Maybe—magic?*

He drew his wand and smiled a little at memories of first year Charms. “*All together now, swish and flick...*”

“Wingardium leviosa!”

The parchment obediently floated upwards.

“Yes,” Draco hissed. “Perfect.”

Three quick steps took him back to his desk. He dropped the ghostly parchment onto its surface, first clearing everything away he’d been working with by the simple expedient of scooping it all up with his left arm and dumping it on his bed, then sat down in his chair and took several deep breaths, willing his heart to slow.

*I have to calm down. This isn’t necessarily what it looks like. There could be lots of reasons why a mysterious parchment I can’t touch has appeared in my bedroom.*

*Right. And Lucius will be getting tapped for Father of the Year any day now.*

Smiling sardonically, Draco leaned forward to read.

## Be Careful 15: What You Try To Say

Draco—

*Don't fall asleep tonight without Dreamless Sleep or something else like it. The Manor's full of dementors and you'd never get out in time. If you can come back to Hogwarts, that's where we're all staying for the time being—and I do mean all. There's a few families hoping to keep their heads down and ride this out at home, but a lot more are packing up and moving into the castle until somebody finds a way to set stronger wards. I think we'd better get used to being crowded.*

*If you can't make it to Hogwarts, Ray's and my coming of age is Friday next. It has to be at the Manor because of magical issues, so I'm sure all our friends will help us clean house for just that one day. We'll do the same for Harry's at the Lion's Den the Wednesday after. Hope to see you there.*

*Aunt Cecy and Abby would send love if they knew we were doing this, and everyone else would say hi, so just assume they did. I'd tell you how to send a message back like this, but I'm not sure it's even going to work once. If this parchment lasts past you finishing reading this, you can clean it off with "Evanescum scribum" and write on it by saying "Inscriptus", then your message. It should pick up your voice like a DictaQuill, and we'll be able to read it on our end.*

*Take care of yourself. We'll see you soon.*

—Hermione

---

Draco rested his fingers on the name signed at the bottom. "Could've guessed that if I'd tried. It sounds like her."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a piece of him was hysterical over what this meant, what it proved, but he was focused for the moment on the instructions in the last paragraph. *It sounds like this is an unstable spell, like it might come apart any second. If I want to get a message back, I need to hurry. But first...*

He pointed his wand over his shoulder at the bed. "Accio." His quill soared into his hand, and the scroll and inkpot he'd been using followed. Quickly, he scribbled down the dates and names—Ray and Neenie, Friday 26 July; Harry, Wednesday 31—then set the real parchment aside and

pointed his wand at the magical one, which was starting to look a bit tattered around the edges. “Evanescum scribum.”

As promised, the words vanished, leaving Draco with not only a clear writing surface but also a dilemma.

*What do I say? “I’m sorry I mistook your world for a dream”? “I’d come back in an instant if I could but I’m under house arrest so I can’t”?*

Simple and factual, he decided. He could decide what, if anything, sappy to say when he’d told them what was going on with him.

*And why I won’t be able to go to their coming of age parties, or probably anything else there ever again.*

Draco cleared his throat, which had become unaccountably choked. “Inscriptus.” The parchment flashed silver, and a small picture of a quill appeared on it in the top left corner.

“What’s that for?” he wondered aloud.

*What’s that for?* the quill wrote in flashingly quick letters.

“Oh.”

*Oh.*

Draco smiled at the thought of the faces on whoever was reading this, then began to speak. If this was going to be his last time talking to the people he’d come to care about, he wanted to make it count.

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Abby had fallen asleep on Remus’ lap by the time the parchment finally went blank and began to fill with new writing. Rather than disturb her, Remus tapped Danger’s vision to watch the words form. Cecy was leaning forward eagerly, her hands stretching out as though she could reach through the parchment to touch Draco again.

*My mother and father weren’t too happy with my disappearing from the manor, the tiny quill scribed in Draco’s handwriting underneath the two ‘test lines’. They think I was sleepwalking. I’m not so sure, but I didn’t say so. I did mouth off to them, though, so they’ve locked me in my room and put me onto Dreamless Sleep until further notice—which, with dear old Lucius, might as well mean forever. Mother, Narcissa to you, seems to think she might be able to talk him around. I’m not holding my breath.*

Cecy’s own breath caught at this, and she grasped at the hand Danger held out to her as though it were a lifeline.

*Instead I'm missing everyone. And thinking. I suppose I could just be having a load of dreams that set off my magic, so that I walk around and conjure myself new robes in my sleep. I might even have been able to Floo to Hogwarts in my sleep without anyone noticing me. What I don't think I could have done on my own is change. And I have changed.*

A long pause, as the quill hovered at the left edge of the parchment. Remus held Abby closer as she shifted restlessly.

*If your world is real, the quill finally wrote, if you're all real, then it changes everything I ever thought I knew. About life, about other people, about me. Part of me doesn't want you to be real, because if you're only dreams then I haven't lost anything by losing you. But another part, a part I wasn't even sure I had, does want you to be real. Because if I do have to lose you, I want to know I really had you, if only for a little while.*

Cecy's face, usually so calm, was anguished. For the first time since Remus had known her, she looked every year of her age and more.

*I want to know it's possible for real people to care about me, and vice versa. And I never wanted that before. Which is what makes me think you might be real after all. A moment's pause. Well, that and the magic parchment. I have no idea how I'd even start this complex a spell, so score one for the Real Team. Unless I fell asleep while I was working and I'm dreaming all this just like I dreamed you. But I don't think so.*

“Smart boy,” Danger said absently, her attention still on the moving quill, now approaching the end of the sheet.

*That looks like all I have room to say. Except goodbye. Which isn't fair. I know I did some stupid things, but does that mean I only get a week of anything good before it's taken away from me? And now I'm whinging, so I'll stop. Tell everyone I'll miss them and I'd come to the parties if I could. Who knows—maybe Lucius will change his mind after all. It's been known to happen.*

The quill paused at the bottom of the parchment, which was beginning to flake away around the edges.

*Mum, it scribbled rapidly, if you're there, I l—*

The piece the quill had moved onto broke away from the main body of the sheet. An instant later, the entire parchment disintegrated, the pieces breaking into smaller and smaller bits until a fine white dust covered the surface of the library table.

“No,” Cecy whispered, her fingers scrabbling uselessly in the dust. “No—no—no...”

Danger pulled her close as she began to cry, the wrenching sobs of a mother who had seen her last link to her child destroyed beyond recall.

---

“Mum,” Draco said quickly, before he lost his nerve, “if you’re there, I lo—”

The parchment fractured, then crumbled, melting before his eyes like the first snow of the season. All that remained was a powder that could have been sugar left over from a pastry, lightly sprinkled across his desk.

“Damn it!” Draco slammed his fist down, then stood up so hard his chair kited across the floor and crashed into the opposite wall. “Goddamned bloody useless thing! Couldn’t have lasted one more second, could you?”

He swore again, stalking about the room, matching his strides to his words, aware he was putting off the moment when he’d have to think about what had just happened. One, two, three, four, five paces and turn, one, two, three, four, five and turn again, one, two, three, four, fi—

His toe hit the wall hard as he swung his foot too far. He snarled, half in pain, half in rage.

*This is not. Bloody. Fair. If I’m going to be under Dreamless Sleep, why bother locking me up? I won’t be going anywhere as long as I’m drugged...*

“But that’s not the point, is it?” Draco went to one knee and rubbed the top of the stubbed toe through his shoe. “The point of locking me up is to keep me here when I’m awake. To ‘teach you a lesson, boy’.” He imitated his father as he might have to an appreciative audience in his dreams

*No. Not dreams. I can’t hide from the truth anymore.*

*I may get there through dreams, but the world is real. It has to be. Either that or I’ve completely lost my mind, and the end result is the same as far as I’m concerned, so I don’t care.*

He sat down, planting his back against the wall, drawing up his knees until they touched his chest and he could rest his chin on them.

“They’re real,” he whispered, rubbing the cuff of the dress robes he was still wearing from Luna’s ball. “They’re all real. I never made them up—they’re as real as I am—”

*And I’ll never see them again.*

The knowledge squeezed his chest tight and coated his mouth with bitterness. For all his fine words earlier, a part of him wished he could have gone on thinking it had all been a dream.

*It would have been so much easier that way.*

Draco pressed his face against his arms and shivered, giving in to the first shuddering wave of homesickness as the knowledge crashed down on him of exactly what he’d lost.

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Abby stirred at the sound of Cecy’s weeping, and Remus quickly stood, settling her into a carrying

position on his shoulder. **I'll find Andy**, he sent to Danger. **You stay with her.**

**I can hardly do anything else**, Danger said silently, as her lips were occupied murmuring soothing nonsense to her friend. **Hurry, please? I'm no Healer, but I think she may need some professional attention after this one. Now get Abby out of here before she wakes up.**

**On my way.** Remus started back between the bookshelves towards the main door of the library.

"Daddy?" Abby mumbled against his neck. "Did Draco write back?"

"Yes, Joy, he did." Remus hissed at the door, which opened obediently. Being an Heir of one of Hogwarts' Founders occasionally had its perks. "But it doesn't look as if he'll be able to come back and see us again any time soon. He might not ever come back at all."

"Yes, he will," Abby contradicted sleepily. "He has to. He's the one in the prophecy. If he doesn't come back, the dementors can't get sent away, and then they'll eat us all up and take over the world."

Remus smiled at Abby's fairy-tale interpretation of the ever-present peril in her life. "I wouldn't say it's necessarily all up to Draco," he said, starting up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower. "We keep learning new magic, better magic, to keep dementors away. If you'd been born back when I was little, you probably wouldn't have all the brothers and sisters you do, because we didn't know then how to make our wards as strong as we can make them now. Dementors could send enough of their darkness through to steal the life from the littlest people around."

"And that's why I have a lot of cousins but not so many aunts and uncles." Abby turned her head so that her other cheek rested on Remus' shoulder. "Because a lot of the babies who would have been aunts and uncles to me died before they got born, or a little bit after. And everybody still wants to have lots of babies because they feel like some of them will die, but all of them live now that the wards are strong, and the more people who live and be happy, the stronger the wards are..."

"That's right." Remus stepped onto the seventh floor landing and set off down the hall. "Which is why the most important thing we can do with our lives is?"

"Be happy." Abby squirmed her elbow out of direct contact with Remus' collarbone. "Because the happier we are, the stronger the wards are wherever we live, because they collect from us just like the dementors try to do. Except that means the dementors eat the wards instead, whenever they can get enough of them together to push past the evil-go-away spells, and then the wards fall down like ours did." She yawned. "Are we going to live at Hogwarts forever?"

"Not forever. Just until we figure out how to keep the dementors from eating our wards." Remus chuckled at the turn of phrase. "Maybe we need to paint them with a bitter taste, like we're going to do with Nicki's thumb if she doesn't stop sucking it soon."

There was no reply from Abby, unless it was to become twice as heavy as she had been a moment

before. *Asleep again. Good.*

“Betelgeuse,” Remus said to the Fat Lady as he approached her.

“And a nice loaf of bug bread to go with it.” The Fat Lady giggled at her own humor and swung her portrait open.

Remus shook his head and hissed a command at the portrait hole. Obediently, it grew larger and lowered itself towards the floor, and he stepped through it easily.

*Put my little Joy in her bed, send a Patronus to find Andy and get her on her way to the library, and then I need to sleep myself. The sooner I let my mind work on this ‘bitter wards’ idea without the encumbrance of actual thinking, the better...*

---

Draco shoved the tears away again with a burst of anger, but he knew they couldn’t be denied for much longer. His eyes, flitting around the room in search of something to glare at, fell on the flask of violet potion waiting innocently on the tray by the door.

*At least if I was asleep I could stop hurting—*

*Wait. Nothing says I have to sleep at night. I could drink it now and put myself out until midnight, then get up and see if I can’t wear myself out enough to sleep again before I have to take my next dose—*

*Except it isn’t safe to do that here. Not until next week. Maybe I could turn myself around in that time, though. It’s worth a try.*

Draco scooted himself over to the tray and picked up the flask, staring at the potion within. “I’m going to get around you,” he muttered to it. “Wait and see. You can’t beat me that easily.”

The potion remained a potion.

*Great, now I really am losing it.*

Draco stood up, set the flask on his bedside table, and transferred the heap of random items back to his desk. “I swear they multiply when I’m not looking,” he said, dropping three quills into the holder. “There was only one a minute ago.”

*You’re stalling, his mum’s imagined voice chided. Get on with it.*

“Yes, Mother.” Grinning a little at his own playacting, Draco lay down on the bed, then got up again and pulled off his robes. He hadn’t bathed since yesterday, and he was starting to feel grimy.

*It won’t hurt anything to clean up before I try this. Now as long as that pitcher is self-renewing...*

The pitcher proved to be exactly that. The water within warmed by wand-heat to just above blood temperature, it made a satisfactory shower when set on a stand Draco conjured in one corner of the room. Said stand was wobbly, but it didn't have to last more than a few minutes, nor did the tub he'd created to hold the excess water. A few moments' intense thought about the linen closet on the first floor, where he had often hidden from his father in a bad mood, produced a bar of soap from the box there, and refocusing his concentration six inches down and to the left netted him a towel.

Fifteen minutes later, having Vanished tub, water, and stand, he was clean and dressed again, his hair still damp but drying quickly.

*Now I can sleep.*

Draco lifted the flask high. "Here's to you, Lucius," he toasted. "Shove it up your own damned arse."

He drank the potion off quickly, before he could think twice about it.

There was barely time to set the flask aside and lie down flat before the darkness swirled over him, reminding him nastily of his last run-in with dementors, of the rage that had shot through him at seeing who was being threatened...

"Mum," he whispered with his last waking breath.

Darkness gave way to streaks of light all around and a high-pitched shriek as though the universe itself were outraged by what had happened to him—Draco caught his toe and stumbled forward—

He stood in the Hogwarts library, not three feet from a pair of witches, the blonder of whom was sobbing on the brunette's shoulder.

Disbelieving hope flared to life in Draco's chest. *I think Lucius may need to fire whoever made that potion for him.*

He started forward. "Mum, it's all right, look, I'm back—"

His hand passed through her shoulder as if he were made of smoke.

*On second thoughts, maybe not.*

Draco held up his arm in front of his face. Through it he could see the vague outlines of the bookshelves beyond, and his skin and robes retained only traces of their proper color.

*Just when I think I've got it figured out, someone goes and changes the rules on me...*

## Be Careful 16: What Shape You Wear

Cecy freed a hand to rub at her left shoulder, which had chilled for a moment. *I am overreacting, she told herself sternly. I must stop. It is self-indulgent and it helps nothing.*

Some part of her obviously disagreed, or she wouldn't still be crying her eyes blind while Danger held her and tried to comfort her.

*If any night could make me run mad, this might be the one. Joy and sorrow in alternation, and all over the same subject...*

The chill returned, sweeping down Cecy's arm to her hand, where it lingered.

*Of course, it would be the left hand. The hand that, according to the old tales, had a nerve which ran directly to the heart.*

Danger shifted in her chair, as though she had found something uncomfortable where she was. "Do you feel that?" she asked quietly. "The one cold spot, where everything else in the room is warm?"

"I do." Cecy found her handkerchief and began to blot her face, sitting back in her chair. The chill on her hand moved with her, and when she tucked away the handkerchief and began to scrub her hands together to warm them, both of them grew cold instead. "Strange."

"More than strange." Danger had her eyes closed and her head tipped back, an expression of concentration on her face. "It reminds me of the feeling I get when I accidentally brush through a ghost. But if there were a ghost here, we would be able to see him, unless he were being invisible on purpose..."

"And most of the Hogwarts ghosts would not be so rude." Cecy kept dry-washing her hands, focusing on the simple repetitive action to keep herself from thinking about what Danger was saying, and what she was not. "Whereas if it were Peeves, we would both be wearing inkwells at this moment."

"At the very least." Danger opened her eyes. "So I think we can rule out its being anything native. However, if it were, let's say, a currently living person somehow transported out of his body..."

“Such spirits are not visible and can affect the physical world little if at all.” Reciting simple facts, things she had known since her second year of schooling, helped to calm her. She had learned these basic qualitative differences among classes of spirits, how to tell which sort one was dealing with and if it had either the capability or the desire to harm one, from the same man who had taught Danger, as well as Danger’s children and Cecy’s niece and cousins.

*And who may yet teach someone else.*

“Maybe we can’t see them, but we can feel them. Involuntary low-level energy theft.” Danger laid her hand on Cecy’s and watched as the fine hairs on the back of her fingers rose in response to the drop in temperature. “Which our bodies perceive as cold.”

Cecy grasped Danger’s hand in both her own, holding it tightly to stay her rising hope. “Then you think...”

“I may. Let’s test.” Danger held up her free hand to one side. “If there is someone else present, would you mind touching me here?” she asked the empty air, wiggling her fingers to be sure the ‘here’ was properly understood. “Long enough for me to be sure of it, please, there’s no point in wondering.”

The chill lifted from their linked hands. Cecy swiftly released her grip and placed her own left palm against Danger’s upheld right—

Just as cold blossomed around them both.

*It seems this night is not through with me yet.*

---

“You’re good,” Draco said admiringly, his hand passing through those of the two women. “You are very good.”

*And I should be a lot more shaken up by this than I am, but I’m too happy to be back here and in communication with somebody. Give it an hour or two; I should be used to it enough by then to do some screaming.*

“Draco?” Mum moved her hand away from Danger’s. “Touch me alone if it is you.”

“It’s me.” Draco intercepted her hand with his other one. “I know you can’t hear me, but I’m here. Somehow. Maybe the potion wasn’t made strong enough...”

“It is, isn’t it?” Danger asked, returning Mum’s incredulous smile. “I thought it would take more than a potion to separate you two at this point. What matters is, he’s come back, despite measures to the contrary—you did take the potion before sleeping, Draco?” She held out her hand towards him, and Draco moved his own through it. “I thought so. So as long as you can reproduce whatever else you did, you can come back in this form as often as you like. I know it’s hardly ideal...”

“Better than nothing,” Draco said, just as Mum said, “It is far better than nothing at all.”

Draco jerked back, breaking their contact, as Mum turned to stare in his direction. “Love?”

“What is it?” Danger asked.

“I thought I heard his voice.” Mum stood up. “Draco, try overlapping your spirit self with my body.” A wicked smile lit her face momentarily. “Consider me Jocasta if it helps you.”

“That’s disgusting.” Draco moved forward a pace or two, as if to hug his mum, then took a deep breath and plunged in, taking up the same space she did. “I don’t go for older women,” he muttered, trying to sort out the sensations. His skin felt uncomfortably warm, buzzing at every point they crossed, but at the same time he could sense a shaken serenity, a rising sense of joy and wonder, that he didn’t think was his own.

“I am sure the older women thank you for that,” said Mum, her voice trembling with more than cold. “Oh, my little love, I thought I had lost you forever...”

“You can hear me?” Draco shut his eyes quickly, fighting the contrasting urges to cry with relief and get away from her before she could tell how weak he’d become. *She knows it already*, he reminded himself. *She’s seen me worse off than this. She wants to help.*

Still, the instincts of a lifetime couldn’t be overridden easily.

*But I’m not an animal. I can’t change what I feel, but I can help what I do about it.*

“Crossing bodies. I almost forgot about that.” Danger was sitting up in her chair, her hands massaging the small of her back. “Why don’t I leave you two alone? It’s getting late.”

“Danger, thank you.” Mum went to hug her friend. Draco stayed put, having no desire to find out what would happen if he accidentally crossed himself with two people at once.

*Though come to think of it, I did that a minute ago, and nothing happened. Maybe I have to be with just one person to get the link I need to talk to them. Or maybe it’s only strong enough with Mum because I...*

He stalled on the word. It had been all right to say it, or start to say it, when he’d thought it was the last chance he’d have to say anything to her at all. But now that he knew he could come back, if not quite the same way he’d been able to before, it was harder to get it out.

*Which makes no sense at all.*

Mum watched until Danger turned a corner beyond the bookshelves, then returned to her chair. “Come sit,” she said, patting her knee. “If I remember right, the chair should be solid to you as it is to me.”

“Let’s find out.” Draco laid a hand on the chair’s back. It did not pass through. “Good memory,

Mum.” After a moment of readying himself, he sat down with her, wincing at her semi-controlled shudder. “Sorry.”

“Do not apologize for what you cannot help.” Mum wrapped her arms around herself. “This will have to take the place of a hug for the moment.”

“Thanks.” He couldn’t feel her arms, but her joy swept around him like a warm and shimmering wind, and it was almost as good—better, in some ways, because this couldn’t be faked.

*I never had this. I tried to pretend it didn’t matter, that I didn’t need it, that the people who did were weak. And then I turned out to be the weak one, and I broke.*

*Maybe I can put myself back together now.*

“I love you, Draco,” Mum said quietly.

*There, she said it first. I’m allowed to answer.*

Draco snorted a laugh at the nonsensical workings of his mind. “Love you too,” he said, and found it surprisingly easy to mean.

*Not that big a surprise, not when I can feel how much she means it.*

*Along with a few other things.*

“You’re tired,” he said aloud. “You should go to bed.”

“I thought I was the mother here,” Mum said in a mock-scolding tone. “But you are right. I am tired, more than I want to admit. Forgive me for leaving you so soon?”

“I’m the one telling you to go. Besides, I’ll be back.” *As long as this wasn’t just a fluke.* “I wonder why the potion didn’t work?”

The swirl of emotions in his mind darkened. “I have a confession, Draco,” said Mum, letting go of her grip of her shoulders to rub her hands along her thighs. “I deliberately allowed you to continue thinking this world was only a dream, rather than telling you at the first that it was real.”

Draco almost jumped out of the chair. “What?”

“Hear me out.” Mum held up a hand, as though she were facing him and conversing normally. “It was my hope that you would accept us more fully if you thought you had invented us, that you would have less fear and grow closer to us so that we could help you to heal. Now that you know the truth, there is no more point in dissembling. Though your body cannot travel between our two worlds without entering its dream state, which the potion you took prevents, your soul’s desire to be here was so strong that you broke free... or so I believe. I might be wrong.” She turned her head to stare at the tabletop. “You may be angry with me for this. I might well in your place. Please believe that I did it for what I thought were the best of reasons, at the time.”

*Angry? Oh, maybe just a little.* Draco stood up, pulling away from her. “So you lied to me,” he said, knowing she wouldn’t hear him. “You lied and made me act like a fool in front of real people, all of whom now think...”

He cast about for a good ending to the sentence, only to discover that there wasn’t one.

*They don’t think anything bad about me. They’ve never treated me any worse than they do everyone else. Much better than anyone I know would have treated some strange boy who showed up out of nowhere in a little girl’s bedroom.*

*And the first thing I thought when I found out this world was real wasn’t how stupid I’d looked. It was how much I wanted to come back.*

*Well, now I am back. Maybe only like this—* he scowled at his translucent self—*but the alternative is not being here at all. Spending my life alone, or with people who think a lot worse of me than anyone here.*

*I think I know which one I prefer.*

“Mum.” Draco sat down again, sliding back into superimposition. “Mum, it’s all right. I understand. I... I forgive you.” He wasn’t sure the phrase was quite right, but she’d know what he meant.

“Thank you, love,” Mum whispered, embracing herself and him once more. “Thank you.”

Voices sounded at the other end of the library, and Mum looked up. “Go and explore the castle if you like,” she said, getting to her feet. “Some of your friends may still be awake.” An impish smile lit her face. “You could tease them if you wanted, as they do not yet know you are here in this form. Though I do seem to recall...”

She frowned in concentration, and Draco jumped in surprise as her body twisted downwards into that of a long-legged, light-furred deer. One blue eye fixed on him, and the doe pranced in place, her hooves clattering on the wooden floor.

“Cecy? Is that you?” Aunt Andy came between the bookshelves, followed by her fair-haired husband. “What are you doing in form? Is something wrong?”

Mum shook her head, then grew once more into her human self. “Change for yourself and tell me what you see,” she said, smiling at her sister, then at her brother-in-law. “Hello, Ted, I barely had a chance to see you at the ball—how are you?”

“Been better,” Ted Tonks said, leaning against a bookshelf. “None too happy with what’s going on, but we all got out alive, didn’t we?”

Draco tuned this out and turned in time to see Aunt Andy shrink into a brown squirrel. He laughed aloud, and the squirrel looked sharply at him. A moment later, Aunt Andy was regarding the same spot. “It almost looks like... Cecy, nothing’s happened to him, has it?”

“It is a long story, Andy, and I have no doubt you are as tired as I am. More, since you and Ted stayed behind to fight. I will explain if you will walk with me back to my suite.”

“Of course.”

Mum blew Draco a kiss, and the adults left the library, Mum beginning her explanation.

Alone, Draco sank down on the chair Mum had been using. “So they’re Animagi, too,” he said. “Makes sense—I know dementors don’t pay as much attention to animals, it was how Black got out of Azkaban...”

A deer seemed like the right form for his mum with her gentle and quiet ways, and a squirrel fit his aunt’s quick movements and chattering habits better than she probably liked to admit.

*So what would I be, I wonder? I should probably start looking into it, if I’m going to come back here for real at some point...*

*Anything but a ferret. Please. Just let it be anything but that.*

The thought made him laugh, and he got to his feet and started for the door.

*I can research that tomorrow, when I wake up. Right now, I have to be a good boy and do what my mummy told me. Draco assumed a virtuous expression. She said to explore, so I’m exploring. And she also said to tease, so I’ll do that.*

*Assuming anyone’s still awake at this hour.*

He located Ray and Neenie in the hospital wing, their beds pushed side by side so that they could hold hands in their sleep. “Thanks,” he told them. “You saved my life tonight.”

Ray grunted and shifted his head on the pillow. Draco took that as ‘you’re welcome’.

He visited the Slytherin dorms next. Most of the beds were full.

*No surprise. Slytherins are too smart to stay home when there’s a possibility it could lead to getting your soul sucked out of your body.*

Marcus Black was snoring quietly in the fourth years’ dorm, and when Draco cautiously slipped into the forbidden territory of the girls’ side (apparently spirits didn’t set off the impassable curtain of water which turned back interloping males), he had a surprise—Lyssa Potter lay sprawled on a cushioned bit of floor among her fellow fifth years.

*Harry Potter’s little sister, sorted into Slytherin. And it’s not a dream.*

*I wish I could tell him. My world’s him. Just to see the look on his face. He’d probably curse me into very small pieces the next second, but it might be worth it...*

Crossing back over, Draco decided to have a look at the seventh years' dorm.

*Just to see who I get to room with around here.*

Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott, or boys who bore a remarkable resemblance to them, occupied two of the six beds. Two more held boys Draco didn't know. The last two were empty. The whole room had an air of having been recently rearranged, and one of the empty beds had a freshly-polished look to it, as though it had just come out of storage and been shined up by a house-elf.

*One of these has to be for Ray. But who's the other one, the new one, for?*

The answer came to him in the moment of forming the question. "That... would be for me."

*And there's more proof that this isn't a thing like home—they'd have thrown me into Azkaban if I showed up there like I did here, not practically adopted me and got ready to send me off to school...*

"I will get here and use it." Draco laid his hand on the post of the bed as though he were swearing a sacred vow. "I don't care what it takes." He grimaced. "I'll even apologize to Lucius if I have to. But I am going back to school."

*And maybe I'll learn how I can stay here. For good.*

## Be Careful 17: Who You Sing With

From the Slytherin dorms, Draco continued his explorations, discovering that most doors and door-like creations were permeable to him in this form. The Hufflepuff dormitories, down the same hall as the kitchens and behind a similar painting of a table laden with food, felt surprisingly homey to him, with their long and low-ceilinged common room and their tan and yellow decorations. Neville and Jonathan Beauvoi were asleep in their respective dorms here, which surprised Draco only a bit.

*I guess just because you're an Heir doesn't mean you have to be sorted into that House. Come to think, hasn't Hermione said something about Ravenclaw?*

The thought led him upwards towards the Ravenclaw tower, with its bronze-beaked sentry eagle. The great, airy common room with its huge silk-hung windows gave him a touch of agoraphobia, but he was sure the Ravenclaws would have felt the reverse in his own dorm under the lake, which to him was cozy and safe.

*Though I like it better how they have it set up here. It doesn't have so many edges and shadows.*

To his surprise, the only person in the dorms he recognized from the party at the Beauvois' was Meghan Black. Hermione, of course, was still in the hospital wing, but someone else who should have been there was unaccountably missing.

*Is she a Gryffindor here? No, she can't be, I was there with Abby, and I saw Harry and the Weasleys coming in, she'd have been with them unless she stopped somewhere along the way...*

“So where is Luna, then?” he asked aloud, stepping back through the door into the hallway.

Faint music caught his ear, a piano playing. As he listened, a girl's voice began to sing.

*I've never been so certain  
I've never been so sure*

Drawn by the sound, Draco turned to his right and started down the hall.

*We're on the side of angels  
If we believe this love is pure*

It led him into a tight spiral staircase, which he started to descend.

*Is it so hard to trust it  
'Cause we've been wrong before*

After a few rounds, he sat down on the banister and pushed off.

*There comes a time in every life  
We find the heart we're waiting for*

The voice soared as in ecstasy, growing louder every second.

*After all the might-have-beens  
The close and distant calls  
After all the try-agains  
Don't be afraid to fall*

Draco came to the bottom and jumped off just in time.

*We're on the side of angels after all*

The piano played an intricate interlude before the voice came back in.

*Every time you touch me  
Don't you feel it too?*

Getting his balance back with the help of one hand on the wall, Draco followed the voice along the corridor.

*The gentle hand that's guiding us  
You to me, me to you*

Once more the joyous launch upwards, as though the singer could not contain herself any longer.

*After all the might-have-beens  
The close and distant calls  
After all the try-agains  
Don't be afraid to fall*

He came to a half-open door. The singing was coming from within.

*We're on the side of angels after all*

Draco stuck his head inside as the piano played three strong ascending chords.

Luna Lovegood sat at the instrument, accompanying herself as she began to sing again.

*Heaven only knows  
Why this took so long  
But only heaven knows  
A love is right or wrong*

She played a chord sharply, held it out, and struck a very low note, then threw her voice higher than Draco had yet heard it go for a third repetition of the chorus.

*After all the might-have-beens  
The close and distant calls  
After all the try-agains  
Don't be afraid to fall*

Piano and voice got quieter together.

*We're on the side of angels  
On the side of angels*

She was barely audible now.

*On the side of angels  
After all*

A rippling chord upwards on the piano, and the song was done.

“Wow,” Draco breathed.

“I’m glad you like it,” Luna said, turning around and smiling at him. “Won’t you come in?”

Draco stared at her for a moment. “You heard me.”

“I can see you too.” Luna tilted her head to one side. “I’m glad you’re not dead. It would make Healer Black very upset if you were.”

“Yeah. I guess it would.” Draco came into the room and sat down on the small couch in the corner. “Will I be putting my sanity in danger if I ask why you seem to be the only one in the castle I don’t have to touch to tell them I’m there?”

“No, not at all.” Luna turned back to her music, starting to flip pages. “I’m a Seer. I have been since I was nine, when my mother died. She was trying to decant a Seeing potion into a glass bottle, but it wasn’t properly made. It exploded, and some of the shards killed her. They might not have, except that she pushed me down before she dodged herself.” Her tone was as matter-of-fact as the one she routinely used to announce her belief in ridiculous creatures. “The glass cut me on my arm, and it had some potion still on it, so the potion got into my blood. Ever since, I’ve been able to see things other people can’t.”

Draco nodded. This, unlike some of Luna’s explanations, made sense.

“And I’m not the only one in the castle who can See things.” Luna placed a gentle emphasis on the word. “Lady Danger has dream-visions sometimes. She used to tell them to us as stories when I would stay the night with Neenie, back when we were little. She may have told us a story from your world, but I can’t recall it. There were so many.”

“I think I see a pattern here,” Draco muttered.

“You’re very astute, then.” Luna found whatever piece she was looking for and began to play a gently swung introduction. “You may have noticed that Potters like to marry redheads?”

“Er. Yeah.”

“Beauvois are the same way about Seers.” The introduction slipped a note higher at the end. “It’s been like that for a long time. The Beauvois were sure that Seeing must be in their blood by now, but they never seemed to have a child who could See. That was because the dementors were stopping them being born, because they knew that the Beauvois held the prophecy about the end of their time to be strong, so as soon as there was a Seer child in the Beauvoi family, she would See the prophecy coming true and it would.”

Draco nodded again, mentally filing this under R for ‘ridiculous’.

“But then Lord Albus and Professor Riddle found the trick to making wards strong enough that dementors couldn’t get through at all, and Mrs. Potter and Healer Tonks and Healer Black found the right mix of potions so Lord Moony and Lady Danger could have a baby, and it turned out to be two babies, and the Healers were able to take some of their blood and put it together and cure Lord Moony’s lycanthropy, and then of course he and Lady Danger could have more children, and they lived because of the wards, and the third-born turned out to be a Seer after all, because three is a magical number.”

Sorting through the welter of names and implausible statements (lycanthropy wasn’t curable—though Moony had made that one remark about not biting anymore, and certainly no one seemed to be afraid of him), Draco finally found the information he was looking for. *Third-born Beauvoi is a Seer. Ray and Neenie count as first-borns together, I think. Jonathan is second. So third would be...*

He inhaled sharply. “Luna, can you give me a name?”

“For the Beauvoi Seer?” The introductory line repeated yet again. “But you know her already.”

“Humor me.”

“Silly.” Luna giggled. “It’s Abby. I thought you knew.”

She played the introduction one last time and started to sing, something about songs and rainbows. Draco wasn’t listening.

*Abby is a Seer. Supposed to See the ending of the dementors’ glory days. I first showed up in this*

*world in her bedroom, and she follows me around like a puppy.*

*Why is this starting to make me nervous?*

He considered refiling Luna's statements, then left them where they were. R was for 'ridiculous', but it could also stand for 'right'.

*And if they turn out to be ridiculous after all, I won't have to move them.*

Smiling at his own silliness, Draco lay down on the couch. He wasn't sleepy, he couldn't be sleepy, he was already asleep... but Luna's music was so soothing, maybe he'd just close his eyes for a few minutes...

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*The lovers, the dreamers, and me...*

Luna let her last note trail off into silence and turned around. Draco was fast asleep on the couch.

*He's so lonely. He has his mum and Abby and all of us while he's here, but he's very lonely in his own world.*

*I think maybe I can help change that.*

She knelt beside him and held her hand where his cheek would be, feeling the slight chill on her skin as her body reacted to the nearness of a spirit. Within her soul, she loosed the bonds on her Sight. *Go to the world where this spirit came from, she told it. Find what I'm looking for there.*

Her magic shot off through the worlds, seeking, seeking...

Finding. A sleeping mind roused half to wakefulness, startled at first, then curious, then amazed and joyful. Luna meshed easily with it, more easily than she had ever meshed with anyone, even Neville or Ray. *See what I See, she willed. Know what I know. Tell me what you think.*

The other mind flowed through her thoughts, following them with ease, and looked through her eyes to see the shape she was seeing. *Are you sure...?* it asked doubtfully.

*I am sure.* Luna blinked twice to bring her Sight into play. *Look here, and here. You can see how he is healing, and growing. He will be very wonderful, with the right help. But I can't be that help; I'm already promised.* She smiled at her left hand. *So can you? Will you?*

A long pause. *I will try,* the other voice said. *But only if he will try too.*

Luna's smile grew. *I know he will try. Will you let me teach you some things I think he will like?*

*Yes, please.* The other mind snuggled down in the back of hers, settling itself firmly into her consciousness, preparing to take in fully whatever she offered it.

Luna returned to the piano and flipped again through her magical music book, settling at last on a song for two voices. *I will sing the woman's part the first time through, she told the other. That is what you will need to learn. Then I will sing the man's and you can sing the woman's against it, to practice.*

*All right.*

Luna hummed her note and began.

---

Draco roused from a confused dream of dancing among dementors, keeping them back solely with thoughts of the people awaiting him on the other side, to hear Luna half-shrieking a line of music.

*And the angels proclaim...*

She held the last note for a long moment, then dropped her voice so far it was almost inaudible.

*It's a dangerous game*

“What was that?” he asked, sitting up.

“It finishes with the title,” Luna answered, turning to face him. “Not many songs do that. It's a duet, really. I usually sing it with Ray, but he's asleep. Would you like to learn it?”

Draco looked at her for a moment. *She's not trying to flirt with me, he decided finally. She's just offering honestly. I think.*

“Yes, please.”

*Though if I'm trying to keep from falling for her, spending time alone with her learning to sing a duet together might not be the wisest move.*

“You need to be here by the piano, then.” Luna smiled at him. “I can't teach you from way over there.”

“Coming.” Draco did as he'd said. A gleam of light caught his eye from Luna's left hand.

“What's—oh.” There were only a very few reasons girls wore gold bands set with gems on that finger. “Congratulations. When did he ask you?”

“At the ball, just before the alarm went off. I'm glad it wasn't before. He could have asked just as well on the skyship, but it's traditional for it to be at a ball, with everyone watching to make it official.”

Draco filed that piece of information away for further use.

*In case I actually do find some way to stay here, and I ever meet a girl who's worth looking twice at, and who'll look twice at me...*

“All right, teach me this song,” he said, peering over Luna’s shoulder at the music. “Where do I sing?”

“Not for a few lines. I’ll sing both parts to begin with, so you can hear how it’s supposed to sound.” She hummed a note, giggling through a bit of it. “It’s perfect for you right now.”

“How so?”

Luna began to sing.

*I feel your fingers  
Cold on my shoulder  
Your chilling touch as it runs down my spine...*

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“Thank you,” Luna said before returning to her singing.

Draco rolled his eyes and leaned closer to listen.

## Be Careful

### 18: Whose Name You Say

Luna began to yawn around five, and shortly thereafter excused herself for the Ravenclaw dorms, leaving Draco feeling a bit bereft. He'd enjoyed listening to the different songs she'd chosen, learning to sing the ones that were meant for a man's voice, and laughing with her at his miscues and fumbles. Mostly, though, he'd enjoyed being able to talk to her as though he were really here again.

*It isn't forever, he reminded himself, starting down the hall from the practice room. Only another two weeks in July, four in August, and then I'll be back to school and I can get rid of the potion without drinking it myself. Maybe foist it off onto Crabbe and Goyle. They'd never notice they weren't dreaming.*

*Or if I can manage that sleep-twisting trick—or even wear myself out by doing a lot of magic—and fall asleep without the potion...*

But that held its own dangers, unless he could do it on the one specific day he knew would be safe.

*Worry about it later. You're still supposed to be exploring, remember?*

Humming "This Is the Moment" under his breath, Draco ascended a set of random staircases and emerged onto a long, open balcony. The stars still shone brilliantly overhead, but the sky was lightening along the horizon, streaks of pink and gold starting to show.

A man stood at the other end of the balcony, cradling a bundle in his arms. "She'll be here soon," Draco heard him murmur. "Wait and see. She'll come right there, where we're looking..."

Curious, Draco closed the gap between them. As he got closer, the bundle began to fuss.

"Hush now, hush," the man said soothingly, his voice half-familiar to Draco's ears. He swayed back and forth on his feet, and the fretful noises died down. "Look, little one, do you see? There she is now."

Draco turned to follow the man's line of sight, but saw only the brilliant colors of sunrise, heard only the birds beginning to call in the woods all around. *It's beautiful, but who is he talking about?*

"Aurora." The man's voice lingered on the word as though he thought it the loveliest ever

spoken. “Goddess of the dawn. Your namesake—or are you hers? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. She’s here now, and so are you. Your very first sunrise.”

*Very first? That’s one little baby—*

The voice suddenly matched itself to a face in Draco’s mind, and he turned around again in time to see Professor Riddle run a gentle finger across the rounded cheek of a black-haired baby girl, who turned her head and fastened her lips around the fingertip.

“I don’t think that’s what you really want,” Professor Riddle said, chuckling under the words. “But if it will keep you happy until we get back to Mummy and Daddy, you can have it. We’d best not keep them waiting too much longer, they’ll be expecting us...”

Draco watched them go, leaning back against the stone railing. “I guess it’s a girl,” he said aloud. “Aurora... Riddle? No, it’s his daughter’s kid. So Aurora whatever-her-name-is. She’s cute.”

A rooster crowed in the distance. Draco found himself hoping the basilisk hadn’t been within earshot.

*Wonder how much longer I have? That looked like about an eight-hour dose of Dreamless Sleep, and I’d guess I got back here around two... if time’s the same on both sides, that would mean I’m here until ten. But everyone had a late night, so they’re not likely to be up until then. Which means I get to spend five hours by myself, and have to leave just as everyone’s waking up...*

*Go on, feel sorry for yourself, jeered a mental voice he recognized, with a shock, as his own. Play the martyr to the hilt—no one’s likely to do it for you. What does it matter if people are awake or not? They can’t see you anyway. And think about what you can do with this form! You can go through any door, open or closed—see everything, every part of the school you’ve ever wondered about—*

“I’d rather be here for real,” Draco muttered. “It’s not fair.”

*Life isn’t fair. I’m amazed you haven’t worked that out by now. The voice turned conspiratorial. Besides, there’s one thing you haven’t tried yet.*

“What’s that?”

*Magic.*

“What, being out of my body and in another world isn’t magic enough?”

*Don’t be stupid. Your own magic. The sort you do with your wand.*

“My wand?” Draco rummaged in his robe pocket and discovered that he did, indeed, have his wand, though it looked as insubstantial as all the rest of him. “But it’s not really here...”

*It’s as much here as you are. And magic lives in the soul, not the body. Why don’t you go*

*experiment and see if anything works?*

“Sounds like a good plan.” He started towards the balcony stairs, then stopped. “Why am I talking to myself?”

*Because you’re the only one who can hear you right now?*

“Whatever.” Draco propped his elbows on the balcony rail, watching the sun’s light bleach the sky from navy to cerulean to pale dusty blue. There would be time to see if magic worked in this form, time to explore through closed doors, time even to watch people wake up and prepare for the new day. This was the only time there would be a sunrise quite like this.

*Great. Not only am I disembodied, I’m a poet.*

*And I didn’t know it.*

He snorted a laugh and kept watching.

---

“Morning, Myrtle,” said the stocky, red-haired man standing in the doorway of the Hogwarts nursery. “You wouldn’t happen to have a dragon in there, would you?”

“Whyever would we keep a dragon in here?” Myrtle Thompson, licensed nurse and mediwitch, looked properly shocked. “That would be very dangerous...”

“Roooooaaaaarrrrrr!” shouted a voice from behind her.

“Though I suppose we might have one somewhere,” Myrtle finished with a giggle as a brown-haired five-year-old darted out of one of the open doors behind her.

“There’s my dragon!” Charlie Weasley went down on one knee and scooped up Charlie Beauvoi. “How’d you sleep, Dragon?”

“Dragons don’t sleep!” the boy proclaimed. “I flew ’round my room and breathed fire all night!”

“I hope you didn’t burn anything up. That wouldn’t be nice to Myrtle, making her clean up your mess.”

Little Charlie shook his head. “I didn’t burn anything. It was magic fire, so it doesn’t have to burn stuff. Where’s Dora?”

“She’s downstairs at breakfast with your mum and dad. I said I’d come up and get you and Nicki. You hungry?”

“Dragons are always hungry.” Little Charlie clambered up big Charlie and sat on his shoulders. “I want porridge.”

“I’m sure we can handle that.” Charlie nodded thanks to Myrtle as she led little Nicole Beauvoi out of another door. “But it has to be blood porridge, if you’re a dragon. Little bits of hearts and livers and lungs, all in a nice blood sludge.”

“That sounds good.” A pair of sharp elbows rested themselves in Charlie’s hair. He reached up and swatted them away before carefully kneeling again to pick up Nicki, who wrapped her arms around his neck with assurance.

“So good of you to come and get them,” Myrtle said, smiling fondly.

“Just reminds me why I want to hold off another few years having any of my own, that’s all.” Charlie started for the door. “Duck, Dragon.”

“Dragons don’t duck.”

“Then dragons are going to get their heads hurt.”

“Okay. I guess I can duck.”

Myrtle watched them go until a sudden wail from another room sent her hurrying to see which of her charges needed attention now.

---

Danger set down her teacup and smiled, getting to her feet to take her daughter from Charlie Weasley’s arms. “Thank you for getting them.”

“You’re welcome. One little Nicki, and one little Dragon, as ordered.”

“Roouooooaaaaarrrrr!” Charlie shouted again, sliding down his older namesake’s back to the floor.

Danger put her free hand to her forehead. “Please, don’t encourage him. He’s been insisting he’s a dragon for the last three weeks.”

“Why not call him that for a while, if he likes it so much?” Dora Weasley put in from across the table, where she was entertaining Michael and Robbie Potter and Johnny Black by making faces at them, in her own inimitable fashion. Johnny pointed at his father, and Dora shifted her features into those of Sirius, still speaking in her own voice as she did. “It’d save us all some time, saying ‘big Charlie’ and ‘little Charlie’ and getting them mixed up.”

“You get them mixed up?” Remus said.

“Not when I’m looking at them.” Dora let her features slide back into their normal configuration. “But I’ve confused people before when I’m trying to explain it to them—they assume that if I’m married to big Charlie, then little Charlie must be ours.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Big Charlie knuckle-rubbed little Charlie’s scalp. “You two have

plenty of kids, you'd never miss one. How about Dora and I take him home with us when this is all over?"

"Ooh, can I?" Little Charlie bounced in place. "Can I, can I, please?"

"No," said Danger, Remus, and Dora in chorus.

"Awwww," said both Charlies together, pouting.

"Stop that." Dora flicked a raisin at them. "For one thing, I'm not ready for children yet. For another, no offense, Remus, but when I do have some, I want them to look like my husband, not like you."

Remus chuckled. "If they're your children, I'd assume they could look like anything they pleased."

"Not necessarily—Metamorph's a tricky thing, it doesn't always show up where you think it will..."

---

With the sun well up in the sky, Draco turned to experimenting with magic. The spells he tried worked, but very weakly, to the point where he had to concentrate until he had a headache just to keep a quill levitated for ninety seconds.

*If it were life or death, I might be able to do something. Otherwise, I don't think I'll bother.*

He'd been hearing sounds of returning life in the castle for some time, and now followed a small troop of chattering Ravenclaws down from their dorm to the Great Hall, where the House tables were occupied all along their lengths by adults and children alike. Harry had his head together with Fred and George Weasley, and Draco made a mental note to stay out of their way. He might be intangible, but he wasn't invulnerable.

*Breakfast smells good. Wish I could have some.* He checked his watch and blinked—it was already half past ten, and he hadn't been pulled back to his body yet.

*Must have been a ten-hour dose after all. Or maybe time does run differently here.*

*I may not be able to starve like this, but I can get awfully hungry...*

Trying to distract himself, Draco looked towards the doors of the Great Hall just in time to see a pack of Gryffindors coming in, and in the midst of them—

*Abby!*

He hurried towards her, dodging her Housemates—it didn't make any real difference whether he went around them or through them, but the latter felt strange. Abby yawned, covering her mouth with a hand, her eyes wandering idly around the Hall—

They fell on him and widened.

Quickly, Draco pressed a finger to his lips.

Abby nodded and ducked out of the stream of bodies, moving to a quiet corner beside the doors. Draco followed.

“What happened to you?” Abby demanded when Draco got within earshot. “Why do you have a bruise right there?” She pointed.

“Do I?” Draco put his fingers to his face and winced. “Forgot about that. It’s been a long night. Look, Abby, I’m all right, I’m just here a little differently than I used to be...”

Abby folded her arms and waited.

*She looks like her sister when she does that.* Draco found himself giving Abby the abbreviated version of what had happened to him in his own world. “So I’ll be here like this until school starts again,” he wrapped up. “Except maybe for Ray and Neenie’s coming of age. What’s that like, anyway?”

“It’s very important.” Abby seated herself at the end of the Gryffindor table, Draco sliding in beside her and hiding a smile at the thought of his Housemates’ faces if they could see him now. “It’s when Father will introduce them to the Manor’s magic, and it to them. Ray will probably use it more, since he’s older, but he and Neenie do everything together so she’ll be there too. They might even be able to help the Manor learn how to make wards the dementors can’t get through. But I don’t know. Father knows an awful lot of magic, and he couldn’t do it.”

Draco nodded, but his mind was on something else. “How will he introduce them to the Manor’s magic? Let them shake hands with it?”

Abby giggled. “No, silly. There’s a special room down in the cellar, where the Manor-core lives. Father took us all down there when we were babies, so the Manor would know us and protect us. But now it’s going to learn Ray specially, because he’ll be the Lord there someday. And Neenie just to be fair.”

*Just to be fair?* Draco glanced up the table at the Beauvois, Moony spooning porridge into little Nicki and Danger laughing with a young witch with lime green hair who bore a definite resemblance to Aunt Andy. *Or because it’s entirely possible she might someday be the Lady of the Manor, if the dementors keep breaking wards down like this?*

He didn’t like the thought, but it seemed all too plausible.

*Suddenly I’m not so sure I want to come here to stay.*

## Be Careful 19: Who You Say You'll Be

As breakfast wound down, Draco noticed most of the Hogwarts-age contingent headed out one of the side doors. “Where’re they off to?” he asked Abby.

“Ou-sigh,” Abby said through a bite of eggs.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, you’ll choke. Outside, yes, I knew that. What for?”

Abby swallowed. “Don’t know,” she said. “Harry said upstairs that he had an announcement and he wanted everyone out on the lawn to hear it.”

“Does everyone include me?”

“That’s a silly question. Everyone means everyone.” Abby drained her goblet of pumpkin juice and set it beside her empty plate. “We’d better hurry if we don’t want to get stuck at the back.”

“Lead the way, then.” Draco slid off the bench and bowed, making Abby curtsy back and giggle before she followed the crowd out the door and through a hallway onto one of Hogwarts’ side lawns.

The skyship on which the refugees from the Beauvois’ ball had arrived—*last night, it was only last night, it feels like so much longer ago*—was grounded near one of the walls. A surprisingly large crowd of students sat in front of it.

*Of course, if everybody’s got a family the size of the Potters or the Beauvois, there’d be more students. The castle’s big enough, that’s for sure.* Draco sat down along the left side of the crowd, Abby in front of him, and watched Harry jump up onto the rail of the skyship, holding out his arms for balance.

“What’s that doing down here?” he asked Abby.

“Don’t know. Shh.”

“So we all know we’re probably here for the rest of the summer,” Harry said loudly, eliciting a few raspberries and boos from the audience. “Which means we’re all going to get sick of each other before the school year even starts. Unless!” He flung up a hand in an obviously overdone gesture, getting a few laughs. “Unless we have something to do with ourselves!”

“Like what, extra homework?” shouted someone from nearby. Draco turned in time to see one of the Slytherin boys he hadn’t known from the dorm the night before. *Except he looks more familiar now that he’s awake...*

“Wrong family,” Harry shouted back. “You want the Beauvois.”

“What, and get in Weasley’s way?” called the other stranger, sitting beside his friend. “I like my bits where they are, thanks.”

The crowd’s eyes turned to Ron, who went red but still managed to look smug.

“No, I had something a bit more fun in mind,” Harry said, walking along the railing of the skyship. “Something with style. Something with class. Something with pirates.”

“Pirates?” Draco repeated, the word lost to his ears in the crowd’s confused murmurs.

“Yes, pirates!” Harry leapt from the railing to the roof of the cabin. “We have a ship, so we should have pirates. But we need pirates with skills beyond the ordinary. We need...” He threw his arms wide. “Singing pirates!”

A ripple of laughter swept through the crowd, but not the ‘look-at-the-nutter’ laughter it would have been at any gathering Draco had ever attended. This sounded more anticipatory, as though Harry had just let them all in on some big joke and they were waiting their turn at the punchline.

“And I,” Harry declared, assuming a noble pose, “shall be that glorious thing, a Pirate King!”

This combination of words struck a distant chord in Draco’s memory. *There used to be this broadcast on the wireless Mother would listen to in the afternoons, about the music written by wizards that had been stolen by Muggles and passed off as their own work... I don’t know how true the stories were, but I remember a song about a pirate king...*

“A Pirate King?” said a voice from the door. Draco, along with the rest of Harry’s audience, turned to see Ray and Neenie, still looking a bit wan but moving well. It was Ray who had spoken, and Ray who now hurried across the lawn to stare up at Harry, looking down imperiously from his high perch. “Are you truly the Pirate King?”

“I am.” Harry jumped down to the deck. “Do you want to become a pirate, lad? I’ll take you on as my apprentice if you do!”

“A pirate.” Ray frowned. “I don’t recall if that’s what my father wanted me to become. My nursemaid knows. Nursemaid!”

“Yes, young master?” Hermione bustled over to Ray’s side.

“Was it a pirate my father said he wanted me to be?” Ray scratched his head. “Or was it something else?”

“Oh dear, oh dear.” Hermione looked back and forth between Harry and Ray. “I can’t be sure—my hearing is imperfect, as you know, young master...”

“Make up your minds!” Harry waved a hand at the two of them. “My pirate ship sails on the evening tide, with my loyal crew aboard.” He glanced over his shoulder, then did a double-take at the empty ship. “My crew! Where’s my pirate crew? I’ll have their livers if they’ve all deserted...”

“Here we are!” shouted Jonathan Beauvoi, jumping to his feet. “Your pirate crew, ready to serve! Right, men?” he appealed to the audience.

“Aye!” “Right you are!” “Pirates forever!” Twelve or so boys leapt up. Blaise was one of them, to Draco’s amusement, as well as Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Anthony Goldstein.

“To the ship, then!” Harry beckoned his crew forward. “And you?” he said to Ray and Neenie.

“I do believe my master did say to apprentice his son to a pirate,” Hermione said, though she still looked uncertain. “Will you take the dear lad, then? And myself, to care for him until he is old enough to do for himself?”

“If you’re willing to wash and cook for the crew as well, you’ll be welcome aboard our ship!” Harry held out his hands to pull Ray and Neenie aboard. “Come, let’s away! Away to a life of piracy!”

Ray took the offered hand and swung aboard, then hesitated visibly, looking over his shoulder. “But what if I don’t like being a pirate?” he said. “When will I be free again?”

“On your twenty-first birthday, like any apprentice, silly boy,” said Hermione, patting his head in a motherly way. “And then we can be married, and happy forevermore!”

Ray gave her an up-and-down look that said more than words could have. “Is there not some lovely young maiden who will rescue me from this sad fate?” he pleaded with the audience, leaning over the rail.

“Welllllll,” drawled Ginny, standing up, as did about a dozen other girls. “I would, but you’re a pirate. They’re so uncouth. And always away from home. No, I don’t think I can love you.” The other girls shook their heads sadly.

“I’ll even take a girl who isn’t so lovely, one who thinks she can’t get a man!” Ray started to look panicked as Hermione simpered at him. “Just not her, please...”

Meghan huffed loudly and sprang up, along with another dozen girls, all looking highly indignant. “For your information, we don’t think our lives revolve around getting men!” she informed him, looking down her nose at him, quite a feat considering the height difference and his elevation on the skyship’s deck. “And we’re not ugly, either!”

“I didn’t mean to say that you were!” Ray clutched at his hair. “Is there not even one of you who can love me? Just one?”

Ginny’s group rippled, and out stepped Luna. “I shall love you, young pirate,” she said, smiling up at Ray. “If you think such poor love as mine may help to save you.”

“Poor love? How could one as beautiful as you give poor love?” Ray clasped his hands against his chest and sighed like a man besotted. “I shall treasure you always, my lady. But you and your lovely sisters must be careful, so that my boorish shipmates never catch sight of you—they would carry you off and marry you against your wills, and you would never see your home again...”

“They would not dare,” Luna said, holding her head very high. “Our Papa is a Major-General!”

“Yes!” Neville came to his feet, smiling broadly. “Yes, I am a Major-General! A modern Major-General, I’ll have you know!”

“And I am sure that you, my only love, will find the help you and my dear Papa need to keep us safe from such terrible pirates.” Luna looked adoringly at Ray.

“Help,” Ray mused, leaning on the rail. “I have it! I shall call for the police! Police, ho!”

“Who wants the police?” Ron marched forward three steps and saluted. “Police here!”

“Call your men into line, please, sergeant,” Ray requested.

“Policemen!” Ron bellowed. “Fall in!”

“Fall in what, sir?” shouted back several male voices, more or less in unison.

“Stop trying to be smart!” Ron berated them. “That’s my job!”

The audience fell about laughing.

When Draco got enough breath back to sit up again, eleven boys stood side by side in front of the skyship, Ron fussily rearranging them until he got them into the order he wanted. This achieved, he turned back to the ship and saluted again. “Policemen assembled, sir!”

“Pirates stand ready!” called Jonathan from his place halfway up the mast.

*And when that thing got a mast I have no idea...*

Draco craned his neck and finally spotted Fred and George Weasley, wands in hands, standing behind the skyship and sculpting it to look more pirate-worthy. As he watched, one twin added a crow’s nest and the other the netting leading down from it to Jonathan’s current position, and Jonathan immediately climbed the rest of the way up to it.

*I don’t know that I’d trust my life to something those two made that quickly.*

*Still, that does look like fun.*

“Sisters, are you ready?” Luna asked the two groups of girls. Giggling assents came back to her, and she beamed at the ship. “The young ladies are prepared!”

“What about musicians?” Neville turned to look at the audience. “If the pirates are to sing, they will need players to accompany them!”

“Well, I suppose we could be tempted into it,” said the Slytherin who’d heckled Ron earlier, leaning back on his hands.

“If someone asked us very nicely, that is,” his friend who’d teased Harry added. “And gave us a quarter of the gate.”

Neville raised an eyebrow. “The show’s free.”

“Pfeh.” The first Slytherin waved away such airy concerns. “It’s the principle of the thing, Longbottom.”

“You’re a Hufflepuff,” the second added, his voice rich with tolerance for such a menial state. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Here,” Ray called from the ship, slashing a cross through the air with his wand. A piece of wood with a hinge on it appeared, and he tossed it towards the two Slytherins. “Quarter of the gate. Are you going to play or what?”

“Might be fun,” said the first Slytherin, catching the wood and Vanishing it with his own wand.

“We’ll need help,” said the second, looking over his shoulder. “Anybody willing?”

Several hands went up. The Slytherin pointed at some of their owners, who moved up to join him and his friend.

Harry climbed nimbly to a spar the twins had added a few moments before and stood up on it. “Thank you, Major-General Stanley,” he proclaimed, gesturing grandly to Neville. “So let us be off to the coast of Cornwall!” A bundle of black cloth came flying at him from Ray’s general direction, and he caught it easily. “To become...” He unfolded the Jolly Roger and displayed it proudly. “The Pirates of Penzance!”

Policemen, pirates, ladies, musicians, and audience cheered.

“We open the first night of school!” Harry shouted over the noise. “Be prepared, it’s not much time! I know most of us know the show, it’s only been a year and a half, but don’t assume the next person over knows what they’re doing! Help them out!” The cheers began to die down, and he seated himself on the spar. “Now, the first thing we’re going to need is—”

A loud crack announced the arrival of a house-elf, carrying a large basket and clad in a towel with

a crest Draco knew.

*And I think I've seen the elf before too. Just... not like this.*

“Kreacher?” he said dubiously.

“You know him too?” Abby said over her shoulder. “He’s fussy, but he cooks well and he always makes sure my bed is turned down the way I like it when I stay over with Susie.”

“Mistress is sending Kreacher out with the songbooks little masters and mistresses will be needing,” the house-elf said, peering around at the assembly. “If the masters and mistresses who will play in the orchestra will tell Kreacher where to find their instruments, Kreacher will go to fetch them as well.”

A loud groan went up from the students. “Are we that predictable?” Ray demanded.

Kreacher looked up at the ship. “Mistress said only to say that she was young once too,” he said. “If masters and mistresses would please come to get their books...”

“Mistress,” Draco mused aloud as the players and musicians surrounded Kreacher. “That’s... Aletha Black, right? Aunt Letha?”

“That’s her.” Abby leaned back through Draco’s knee, grinning at the shiver that went through her. “She loves music and plays. She directs most of the shows that happen here during the year.”

“Is she a teacher too?”

Abby nodded. “She teaches elementary Potions. I’ll have her this year. Are you still taking Potions?”

“Mm-hmm,” Draco said absently, trying to get his half-recognition of the two strange Slytherins to solidify as it had for Professor Riddle.

*Of course, given his counterpart, this’ll probably be just as bad.*

“You’ll have Professor Snape, then.” Abby’s shiver this time had nothing to do with being crossed with Draco. “I don’t like him. They say he threatens to quit his job every year. I hope he does before I have to take advanced Potions.”

*So Snape’s still teaching Potions. Dumbledore’s still Head. McGonagall’s still doing Transfiguration, though there’s probably others too because there’s more students now. Strange to see things so different, and still so much the same as they are back where I’m from...*

Kreacher, who had disappeared, reappeared with another house-elf, both clutching guitar cases. The Slytherins accepted them with nods and sat down on the grass. Flipping the lids open and slinging their instruments’ straps over their shoulders, they started to tune up.

*All right, if things are so much the same here as they are back there, I need to think about my dorm. Who sleeps in there? Me, Zabini, Nott, and...*

“Oi, Vince, Greg!” called Ron from the side of the ship, where he was consulting with Harry about something. “Do the Duel for us, mates, go on!”

The names snapped Draco’s train of thought into focus, and he stared aghast at the two Slytherins, one of whom was now picking out a jangling melody while giving his opposite number a challenging grin.

*I should have seen that coming.*

The other boy matched the grin and echoed the melody on his own instrument.

*Vince. Vincent Crabbe. And Greg. Gregory Goyle.*

The resemblances were obvious, now that he knew what to look for. The differences—

*They look intelligent. I’d say that’s what threw me off.*

The melody passed back and forth between the two guitars, speeding up as it went, until the two were playing a swift-fingered duet.

*But what would have happened to the blokes I know if they hadn’t been told from the time they were kids that they’d never be anything but muscle, not to try to think too hard? They wouldn’t have turned out like this, but maybe they wouldn’t have been quite as thick as they are...*

The students standing around Vince and Greg were clapping in time to the music, a few of them dancing in place.

*Too hard to figure out right now. Draco yawned. Maybe in the morning I’ll understand it better.*

He lay down where he was and closed his eyes, the lively music accompanying him into sleep.

If he had looked at his watch, he would have seen that it was eleven o’clock.

---

Narcissa froze in place as Draco stirred.

*So soon? It is only one o’clock, and the dose Lucius set for him was nine hours...*

She slipped quickly out of the room and relocked the door.

*He must have drunk the potion very early in the afternoon. Likely trying to forget the fight.*

*I wish I had that luxury. But I must try to placate Lucius. If he will not relent but insists Draco must remain where he is until he ‘learns better’, if Draco retains this new strength he has found,*

*then they may remain at odds forever.*

*We cannot have that. Not if we are to survive this war as a family.*

She had done what she could to ensure Draco would live comfortably for however long Lucius' edict lasted—a new door in his bedroom led to the bathroom at the end of the hallway, and his bookcase had been enchanted to bring him any volumes he requested from the Manor's library. Now it was time to see to the other side of the equation.

*As abhorrent as I occasionally find that duty, I knew what I would be expected to do when I married Lucius. I can hardly cavil at it now.*

Head high, Narcissa descended the stairs.

---

Far away, Cecilia Black dreamed of a world where she and her love were the true and only parents of her son, where evil was defeated and hope ascendant.

For the first time in her life, such a dream looked as though it might someday come true.

## Be Careful 20: How Long You Take

Draco opened one eye and sighed.

*Joy, rapture, and other expressions of glee. I'm back.*

He flicked the light on the ceiling to life with his wand and got up, glaring around a room that looked even smaller and dingier than it had a few hours before.

*On the other hand, I can do real magic here, and talk to people face to face. Or I could, if there were people.*

There was, however, a piece of parchment on his desk that hadn't been there when he'd fallen asleep.

*Could that be...?*

*No. It can't. Draco sat back down on the bed, pressing on his knees with the palms of his hands, willing his heart to slow. It's plain old parchment, not magic. It's probably just a note from Mother. Nothing to get all excited over.*

When he thought he was calm enough, he crossed the room and picked up the parchment. As he had expected, the few lines on it were in Narcissa's handwriting, and explained the improvements she'd made to the room while he slept.

*At least she knows a little more than Lucius about the necessities of life. And letting me have any book in the library sounds promising. Draco glanced at the bookshelf under the window. I wonder, did I have any ancestors who weren't quite such rampant xenophobes?*

Only one way to find out.

He knelt beside the bookshelf, drew his wand again, and rapped it against a corner. "Catalogue," he said in the commanding tone it was always best to use with enchanted objects. A niggling thought in the back of his mind prompted him to add, "Please."

The empty space he'd left on the shelf when he'd loaded it with his schoolbooks shimmered. Then a huge, leather-bound book lay there, the dust on its cover settling into new patterns with the wind of its journey. Draco picked it up and sneezed. "Tells you how often we're in there," he

muttered, carrying it back to his desk. “All right, time to look a few things up.”

Ten minutes later, Silencing Charms carefully placed on the doors and window (it was one in the morning, after all), Draco traced the complex pattern on the cover of the brightly-colored book sitting on his desk with his wand’s tip. “Aperium piraticum!” he intoned.

The book opened of its own accord, and a miniature ship appeared above it, sailing through invisible water. Draco turned the lights off, tucked his wand away, and sat back as a sprightly tune began to play.

*So somewhere along the line, one of my ancestors thought enough of this show to not only save the program, but to bind his memories into it so that it would reproduce the performance for which it was created.*

*Why am I suddenly tempted to leave this where Lucius can find it?*

But as amusing as Lucius’ reaction might be, it would end in the destruction of the little pamphlet, not to mention a furious search through the Malfoy Manor library for any other such defiling matter, and its swift annihilation when found.

*And I have plans for some of that.*

He leaned forward and planted his elbows on the desk, watching the antics of the tiny pirates on the deck of the ship as the overture played on.

---

“So he arrived back here around two, and Abigail last saw him at eleven.” Tom paced up and down the length of the room. “That sounds suspiciously like a one-to-one, instead of the sixty-to-one we’d established from his earlier visits.”

“One-to-one what?” Aletha asked, taking baby Aurora from Minerva and wincing at an extra-loud thump from next door, where Sirius and Regulus were entertaining their various offspring.

“Time substitution.” Tom’s hands described circles in the air. “Imagine two clocks. Both set to midnight. One shows time in our world, the other in the world from which Draco comes. If he makes a transit at midnight—”

“One of the original type?” Minerva interjected.

“Yes, one in which he sleeps normally. If he enters his dream state, and thus makes transit, at midnight, he arrives here at the same time. He then finishes his night’s sleep as he usually would and wakes to a day in our world. For the sake of argument, say he spends a full twenty-four hours with us. When he falls asleep and enters dream state again, he makes transit back to his own world—but he arrives there not twenty-four hours after he left, but twenty-four *minutes* .”

“Ah-ha.” Aletha nodded, bouncing Aurora in her arms as the small face began to wrinkle. “I had

wondered why no one in his own world had missed him until now.”

“And after that twenty-four minutes away, he sleeps out the night he left, and wakes to a day in his own world.” Minerva shook her head. “I would find that constant switching maddening.”

“He will inevitably come to think of one world or the other as unreal.” Tom rested a hand on the stone of the wall. “But that is only part of the problem. The spirit form Luna and Abigail described to me seems to experience time in the two worlds at the same rate, which means there is no time ‘left over’ for his mind to recuperate in sleep as is normal. If that continues for longer than a few days, it could well drive him mad in reality.”

“But so could being trapped alone in a world where he is despised,” Minerva pointed out. “Especially as he is adopting our ways quickly, by what little I saw and all that I’ve heard. I’m well aware of the physiological consequences of going without sleep, but there are such things as psychological needs as well.”

“Even if he gets back his more normal schedule, wouldn’t he be living each day twice?” Aletha asked, handing a now-fretful Aurora back to her mother as Morgan emerged from the bathroom. “I’d be worried about the cumulative aging, if he kept it up for longer than about a year. Similar to what you see in people who’ve had to use Time-Turners extensively.”

“This the dream-boy?” Morgan asked, sitting down on her bed and rearranging her robes and her daughter to cut off the incipient wail before it got started in earnest. “The one Cecy’s adopted?”

The other adults nodded.

“Don’t know about you, but I’d be looking for a root cause.” Morgan had inherited both her parents’ brains and put them to good use as one of the most tenacious investigative officers the DMLE had seen in years. “What’s causing such a huge magical imbalance that this boy can come and go pretty much at will from one world to another? Which world is it in, ours or his? And most important, what happens when it clears itself up?”

Tom smiled ruefully at his daughter. “That has the sound of a far better point than I would prefer it to be. Those, I should say, rather, since all of them are good points. But the last, as you said…”

“If the imbalance corrects—no, when it corrects—traveling as Draco does now will become impossible.” Minerva had her eyes shut, likely visualizing a diagram. “Even spirit-travel would be untenable, with the amount of energy needed. Once, perhaps twice, it could be done—but no more than that. Not without risk of burning out one’s magic, or even one’s life.”

Aletha sat down at the table in one corner. “None of you really got a chance to see Cecy with him, did you?” she asked. “I know you saw a bit of it getting here, Tom, Minerva. But I was there for a week, watching them together. No one who came at this fresh, without an idea of the situation, would have been able to tell you that those two were new to each other. He takes to her mothering like Meghan takes to dancing. As for Cecy, she’s in paradise. After years of helping other people’s children overcome pain, always having to stay that Healer’s distance away, now she has

one of her own, one who needs all the love she can give him, and who gives it back to her in kind.” She laughed. “He occasionally looks a bit dazed by it all.”

“Occasionally?” Morgan said, looking up from Aurora. “If I’d lived a life like the one Cecy told me about, and then been thrust into our world, I’d be more than occasionally dazed. I’d be convinced I’d lost my mind.”

“He still wonders,” said Tom, hands in his pockets. “I think I may have helped to convince him more than anyone else.”

“You?” Morgan tilted her head at her father. “How?”

“His world is currently engaged in a war. Think of our Troubles, make them a few dozen times worse, then add a leader for the ‘blood purity’ side whose only morals involve getting what he wants and remaining alive as long as possible, to the point where he seems impossible to kill.”

“Got that. Doesn’t explain what you have to do with anything.”

“Many people in our world have counterparts in that one.” Tom gazed out the window at the bright sunny day, his tone thoughtful. “It seems that, had things gone different, I could have become the Darkest wizard in a hundred years.”

“You? Dark?” Morgan burst out laughing, then yelped. “Aurora! Bad girl! No biting Mummy!”

“Don’t startle her, then,” Minerva retorted. “Honestly, you should know better by now.”

Morgan sniffed at her mother. “Come on, Rory, let go now...” She broke the suction with a finger, then tickled the baby’s lips until they opened again. “So you’re Dark somewhere?” she said once Aurora was reattached, looking up at Tom. “Now I really have heard everything.”

Tom smiled. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I need every reassurance I can find that I am still myself.”

“With these ladies around, would you dare be anyone else?” Aletha asked.

“No.” Tom crossed to the bed, to watch his granddaughter finish the first course of her lunch. “I cannot say I would.”

---

Draco had finished with *The Pirates of Penzance* and was just watching the finale of *H.M.S. Pinafore* when a rattle by the door alerted him to the arrival of a new tray.

*Must be breakfast time. Good thing, I’m starving. I should see if I can’t get something to keep up here, since I’m likely going to be sleeping at odd hours and that will mean eating at even odder ones...*

He made quick work of the contents of the plate while sailors and ladies danced on his desk, then

closed the Pinafore program and returned to the Pirates one.

*They open the first day of school, Harry said. If I can get there—if I can get rid of the potion in time—if I can prove I'm ready, and I ask as nicely as I know how...*

It was just possible that the ship of the Pirates of Penzance might have an extra crew member aboard when it sailed into Hogwarts.

*If I could play any part I wanted, I think it'd be Samuel. The 'sidekick' pirate. Draco watched closely as Samuel proclaimed that Frederic was no longer a pirate's apprentice but a pirate full-grown. He has a few solo bits, so I'd get a moment in the spotlight, but it would only be a moment. Less chance of making a complete fool of myself than if I were to try to be Frederic or the Pirate King.*

*Maybe someday I'll try for something more like that. I know they do amateur theatricals, and Pirates has to be popular...*

Then he snorted at the assumption he was so blithely making, that he'd be around to perform in said theatricals.

*All I can do at this point is hope. Hope, and prepare. In every way.*

And one or two of those ways would be good for him in all senses of the word.

*Sitting around reading and watching memory-shows is fun, but I need to keep myself active as well. Fencing and dancing should do just fine. Though our houseguests might start to wonder what all the thumping up here is...*

Draco grinned. *Our houseguests can kiss my piratical arse.*

*Now if only I dared say that to their faces...*

## Be Careful 21: What You Bargain With

Lucius mounted the stairs to the second floor of his home, scowling to himself.

*Five days. Five days and still the boy refuses to crack. Narcissa says he even seems happy. Not that she has spoken to him, I forbade that expressly and for a change she's listened to me, but she sees him smiling as he sleeps or hears him talking to himself about some piece of work from outside the door.*

*I should have done at the outset what I am about to do now. It would have made everything simpler.*

A strange sound came to his ears as he gained the hallway. It was as if—

*No, it is precisely what it sounds like.*

*A voice. Singing.*

*Unaccompanied, so it is unlikely to be the wireless, and only one person resides on this floor.*

*I believe that will be quite enough of that.*

Pulling the key to Draco's room from his pocket, Lucius started down the hall, quietly. If he could catch the boy in the act, there might be enough shame there to make a dent in this strange new brashness.

As he came closer, he began to hear words.

“...and overbearing fathers, yes, and also You-Know-Who...” A snicker, then the song resumed. “The task of filling up the blanks I'd rather leave to you, but it really doesn't matter whom you put upon the list, for they'd none of them be missed, no, they'd none of them be—”

Lucius shoved the key into the lock and turned it savagely. The singing broke off with a gasp as the door opened.

*Much better.*

“I see you are occupying yourself productively,” he said, surveying the disarranged interior of the

room. The bed and the wardrobe had been shoved into a corner, and the floor was covered with a chalked grid. A practice rapier hung by its belt from the back of the chair beside which Draco was now standing. Lucius noted with detached approval that his son's face was flushed, his breathing rapid and shallow.

*He still fears me. He may prate when he thinks no one is near, but confronted with my reality, he quails.*

*Yes, this will be for the good of all.*

Draco gave his head a little shake, staring at an upper corner of the room, then brought his gaze down to Lucius. "Did you want something?" he asked with bare civility.

"As it happens, yes." Lucius advanced into the room. "Your attitude does not appear to have improved. You will therefore be staying here for the foreseeable future."

"Surprise, surprise," Draco muttered under his breath.

"How ungrateful of you, Draco. Not to appreciate the chance to live in luxury while doing no work in return." The boy had been writing something, Lucius noticed out of the corner of his eye; the scroll was still unrolled on his desk, the quill leaking ink where it had been dropped across the parchment. Several others sat in a rack on the floor beside the chair.

"Live in luxury?" Draco repeated, his tone shading out of civil and into hostile. "Is that what I'm doing here?"

"You have air and light and space, ample food and drink, books and games with which to amuse yourself. There are guests of the Manor less well provided for." *The subtlest of hints, but he catches it easily, as I knew he would—his state could be reduced to that of our 'guest' on my whim.* "And your current attitude leads me to believe I have given you too much." Lucius continued to advance, until he was within arm's reach of Draco, who stared at him, fear warring with determination in the grey eyes so like his own. "It is time for you to give back."

"Give back what?"

There was definitely sneer in that tone, Lucius decided. *This is long overdue.* "Your wand, Draco. You will give it to me." He put out his hand. "Now."

---

*I don't believe this.*

An idle portion of Draco's mind noted that he might want to take another look at the things he could and could not believe, if the former included himself traveling between worlds in his sleep and the latter his 'father' being an arrogant bully.

*But he's never tried anything like this before. Locking me up for nearly a week, then marching in*

*and demanding my wand... I know the Dark Lord took his to use, but why does he suddenly think it's so important to take mine away? Is it just because he can't stand the thought of me having something he doesn't?*

Draco swept the musings into a back corner to think about them later and returned his full attention to the man in front of him. One word, if he could say it, would change the dynamics of the situation entirely.

*And two weeks ago, I wouldn't have been able to say it. But now... now I think I can.*

“No.”

Lucius jerked as if he'd been Stunned from behind.

*What was he expecting, me to hand it over and thank him on bended knee for allowing me to continue breathing? Then again, knowing him, he probably was. And two weeks ago, maybe I would have. Or maybe I'd have whined a bit, then given in. But now I have a crup in the race, and it's just pulled ahead of the pack.*

*I surprised him, so I have the advantage, but it won't last. I have to think fast, before he recovers. Why is this happening now? Is it just because I haven't broken, or is something else going on?*

His eye fell on the slip of parchment he'd tacked to the wall above his desk, bearing three names and two dates, and a suspicion blossomed in his mind.

*Quick, start talking. Get him on the defensive. And for Merlin's sake remember to use surnames!*

“You want to go out hunting for Potter, don't you?” Draco challenged. “You want to make sure they don't leave you behind at home to hear how it all came out.”

Lucius stared wide-eyed at Draco, the color draining from his face. Draco allowed himself a small, wintry smile and kept talking. “This isn't about me. This is about you. You need a wand and I'm the closest place you can get one. Leaving me more helpless than I already was so I'll break faster is just a bonus. You want to be in at the kill. But without a wand, you're a handicap, a nuisance. He'll order you to stay here, and you've got to obey.” The smile grew. “How's it feel to be me?”

*Enough of that. He's got the point already.* Lucius was going from pale to flushed, which meant in another moment he'd be angry enough to start talking again. *Time to offer an alternative...*

“I'll let you borrow my wand, since you want it so much.” Draco folded his arms over his wand pocket. “You can use it to go try and catch Potter, to go out and play with Muggles, whatever you want to do with it. But I want it back when you're done. And I want something in return. Three somethings, actually.”

“And those are?” Lucius' face was beginning to regain its normal color, and his expression was changing, going from a combination of shock and anger to...

*Is that pride?*

“One.” Draco held up a finger, not lifting his arms from their place. “Let me out of this room during the day. I’ll stay on the grounds, or even in the house if you say so, but I’m tired of these same four walls. Two.” Another finger. “Let me decide for myself whether or not to dose my sleep. I’ll let you lock me in at night if you want, so I don’t wander off again, but I want to be able to choose to take the potion. And three.” A third finger joined the others, and Draco prayed silently Lucius hadn’t seen him swallow. This was the big one. “If it becomes possible, I want to go back to school in September. To finish my education, to become a better wizard.”

*To learn how people live who don’t threaten one another with every third word. To sing and dance and make a complete fool of myself on a stage. To hug my mum and spin my little sister around until she’s so dizzy she can’t see straight.*

*But you don’t need to know any of that.*

Draco held his breath, met Lucius’ eyes, and hoped.

---

Lucius brought his face back under his control, but his thoughts could not be so easily realigned. *This is the boy of whom I once said that he would never learn even the basic tenets of negotiation...*

*It seems more of my lessons got through than I realized.*

The back of Lucius’ mind had been sifting through Draco’s proposal, and now informed the front of the mind that it seemed harmless enough. Appropriate measures could be taken to ensure that Draco kept his word to stay on the grounds, and the Dreamless Sleep had been more a sop to Narcissa than anything else. As for school...

*If Severus becomes Headmaster, as the Dark Lord intends, there will be no better place for my son than Hogwarts reborn. Especially now that he is finally learning how to wield power in a fashion befitting a Malfoy.*

*Still, it might be well to refuse one of his demands. To establish who is the master here.*

“I believe I can countenance giving you the freedom of the grounds, as you had before.” Lucius smiled to see the disbelieving hope start to show in Draco’s face. “And I too have hoped that you could return to school for your final year. But the potion... that, I must still insist upon. I will allow you to choose when to take it, but take it you will. For that, you give me the use of your wand and your word to cause no more disturbances in the house. Are we agreed?”

Mutiny lurked in Draco’s eyes for a brief instant, but he blinked it back and replaced it with calm. “It remains my wand, even though you’re using it,” he said, in a tone of clarification. “I have the first claim to it, unless the Dark Lord needs you for something, and I take it with me when I leave for Hogwarts.”

*Giving me five weeks in which to disarm some unsuspecting fool and thus make his wand mine by right of conquest. "Agreed."*

*"Agreed."*

Father and son both bowed, the shallow bows of a contract made.

"I will have my first need of it tomorrow night," Lucius told his son, feeling generous. "You may use it until then."

"Thank you." There might have been a trace of sarcasm in the words, but Lucius chose to ignore it, instead turning and leaving the room.

This had become a better day than he had dared to hope it might. His son was growing up, and he would be able to participate in the capture of Harry Potter after all.

A celebration was clearly in order.

---

Draco held his pose beside the desk for a slow count of fifteen, then dropped back into his chair, his heart pounding louder than a giant's footsteps in his ears.

*It worked. It worked. I don't believe it worked.*

*It's not perfect. I still have to take the potion every night. But I already know when I'll be able to get rid of that. Now I'll get the chance to do it.*

*And I'm free. An open door had never looked better. I can get out of this room. Go for a walk outside. Breathe fresh air, maybe even fly a bit...*

A huge yawn interrupted his train of thought.

*Or perhaps I should take a nap first. I won't enjoy anything if I'm tired.*

He'd been appraised of the dangers of constant spirit-travel between the worlds on his second visit, and had agreed (after pitching a brief and private fit over the unfairness of life) to limit himself to one night in three visiting. A real night's sleep, even with the potion affecting it, had convinced him he'd made the right choice.

*Of course, I'd still prefer to go without the potion, because then I'd get the best of both worlds...*

Another yawn. He'd been up most of the night writing, after the potion he'd taken at ten the previous morning had worn off him, and was almost up to the present in recording the story of his dream-travels.

*Good thing, too. Today is going to be important.*

Draco drew his wand, stroked it lovingly with a finger, then waved it at the door, closing and locking it. Heart beginning to speed up again, this time with excitement, he replaced his bed where it had been and climbed onto it, covering yet another yawn with his hand.

*I did it. Turned around my sleeping pattern. And just in time.*

*Today's the 26th. Ray and Neenie's birthday.*

*Fidelus Manor, here I come.*

## **Be Careful**

### **22: Where You Call Home**

Hermione Beauvoi swung up into her favorite climbing tree, letting the joy which swelled inside her find full freedom in the clasp and pull of branches under her hands.

*Today I am a woman, a witch full-grown, ready to find my place in the world or make it as I will. Today my brother is a man, and will take up the duties of Heir to a wizarding house. Today the Beauvois return to Fidelus Manor, cleansed of evil and welcoming its masters home.*

And today might be special for yet another reason. She would know in just... a few... more... seconds...

Her head topped the windowsill of what had once been the blue guest room and was now a permanent bedroom for one who was only sometimes present.

*It looks like today is officially 'sometimes'.*

Hermione smiled and climbed one branch higher, preparing for her grand entrance.

---

Draco came awake all at once.

*Did it work? Did I make it?*

He sat up, watching the sunlight play along the wall that included the closed door. *At least I know there's no dementors around. Except there's a funny shadow—what is that—*

“You came!” cried a girl’s voice. “I’d so hoped you could!”

Draco spun. Hermione sat on the windowsill, dressed in blue and silver, her face bright with welcome.

“I’d hoped so too,” he said, letting his smile match hers, though he had to fight to keep it from turning into an idiotic grin. “What are you doing over there?”

“This is how I came in.” Hermione dropped lightly to the floor, flipping her hair over one shoulder. “Up the tree and through the window.”

“You can climb trees in those robes?”

“I can climb trees in anything, thank you very much.”

“You’re quite welcome.” Draco bowed, and Hermione laughed and curtsied. “So where’s everyone else?”

“Downstairs. Father and Mother are checking the Manor-core, making sure the dementors didn’t damage it. They shouldn’t have been able to, but...”

“They shouldn’t have been able to break your wards, either,” Draco finished, offering Hermione his arm. The gesture felt natural, which some part of him found alarming, but he’d had etiquette lessons since he was a child, so why should it be bothersome that he was putting them into practice?

*Maybe because of who she is, or looks like. Still, in this world her blood’s pure enough I doubt even Lucius could take umbrage. Unless her mother...*

*You know what? I don’t care.* Draco opened the door and stepped out into the hall with Hermione. *I cared back home because I was expected to care. Now I’m not. So I don’t.*

*But there are still some things I do care about.*

“Will you excuse me a minute?” he asked Hermione. “I slept in these robes, and wore them most of the day before that, and this is obviously a big deal, so I’d rather look my best.”

“Of course. It’s going to take nearly an hour for everyone to arrive, so there’s no rush. But we wouldn’t start without you in any case.” Hermione pressed his hand, smiling at him again. “I’ll see you downstairs. Thank you again for coming.”

“Thank you for having me.” As he watched her dance away down the hall, Draco recalled other times he’d heard and spoken those words, and the boredom or hostility they had veiled.

*What is it about these people that lets them be so real?*

He went back into his room, pondering it. The dress robes he’d worn to Luna’s ball were still at Malfoy Manor, since he’d worn them when he’d traveled back from Hogwarts, but a clean set of day robes should do.

*Hope Mum gets here soon. I’ve missed her.*

Thoughts of her made him smile. Laughing at some joke he’d told, explaining things his yearmates took for granted...

*Nearly getting Kissed by a dementor.*

Chills ran up and down his spine as he opened the wardrobe and took out one of the neatly pressed

robes hanging within.

*Maybe that's the answer, or part of it. You don't have time to think up stupid reasons to hate each other when there's a real enemy trying to do worse than kill you.*

*Does that mean if they get rid of the dementors, they'll become more like us? Caring about things like how pure your blood is, where you come from, what House you're in?*

Draco shut the wardrobe door and checked himself over in the mirror. "They can't," he said to his reflection. "They're past all that now. They know better. Right?"

His reflection looked skeptical.

*Enough heavy thoughts. This is a day to be happy. I'm back, and there's going to be a party, and I get to see Ray and Neenie come of age.*

*And if what I suspect is true, there might be something in it I can use.*

Draco shut his bedroom door and trotted down the hallway to the bathroom.

*Voldemort hurt me. Humiliated me. So did Lucius. And a lot of the others, but those two are the worst.*

*No one does that to me and gets away with it.*

*No one.*

---

As soon as the carpet had gone into hover, Abby was off the side and running for the door.

"Abby!" Cousin Dora called after her, but Abby wasn't listening. She had to know if her Sight had lied to her. It almost never did, but sometimes she Saw two things happening at once, and she had to figure out what to do to make the good vision happen and the bad one go away.

*And sometimes I think I did the right thing, and it turns out I didn't. Usually it's not a big bad thing that happens—well, all right, it's never been a big bad thing that happens. Yet. But this time what I Saw was really big and bad, and I had to make sure it wouldn't happen.*

Her feet flew down the second-floor hallway—she was at the door, pulling it open—

The bed was empty.

Abby put her hand over her mouth to stop a squeak of dismay from getting out. *It doesn't mean the bad thing happened, she tried to remind herself. I told Father and Mother about my Seeing, and they told all the right people who could do something about it, and that means the bad thing can't have happened.*

But her thoughts sounded pale and flat, even to her. She was too old now to pretend that just because the grownups knew about a bad thing, that meant they could automatically stop it. People couldn't fix everything. Some things had too much weight behind them, too much force of 'what should happen', for anyone to stop them.

*But what I Saw... that can't be meant to happen, it can't be! And Cousin Tom—Professor Riddle, I have to remember to start calling him that now that I'm going to be at Hogwarts—Professor Riddle promised that he would do the spell right away, to be sure—*

“Looking for something?” asked a teasing voice from behind her.

Abby shrieked and spun around. “Ray! Don't do that to—”

“Ray?” Draco folded his arms, scowling at her. “I think I'm insulted.”

“Draco!” Abby seized him in a hug, and he hugged her back, freeing one hand after a moment to muss up her hair. “Stop that!” She pretended to snap at his wrist, and he pulled it out of the way, laughing. “When did you get here?”

“Just a few minutes ago. Neenie came in my window to say hello, but other than her, you're the first person I've seen.”

Abby nodded. “Jonathan and Dragon Charlie and Nicki are up on the carpet with big Charlie and Cousin Dora. And Mother and Father and Ray are already here; they came with Neenie and the rest of the grownups early this morning to make sure the dementors were gone. They don't usually stay in a house long after the people leave.” She took Draco's hand and started leading him towards the stairs. “Only family's allowed to be at the actual coming-of-age, the magic won't accept anyone else, but everyone comes to the party afterwards, and now that we're sure the house is safe again we can open up the Floo, so that's how all our friends will be coming... Draco, what's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Draco slid his hand out of hers, showing her a forced smile. “You go on. I'll find something to do until the party starts.”

“What are you talking about?”

Draco sighed. “Abby, you said only family gets to see the coming-of-age ceremony.”

“Yes.”

“I'm not family.” Judging by the look on his face, the words had hurt him to say. “I don't know quite what I am, but family isn't it. I wish I could be there, but you said there's magic and...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I can be here for the day. Come to the party and see everyone. But that's all.”

Abby tilted her head, thinking. It was true that Draco wasn't related to them in any usual sense of the word, but if what Mother had told her was true, his blood had started out the same as theirs,

only very far back.

*Almost as far as Cousin Tom. And he'll be here. He promised.*

*So the only reason Draco couldn't come is because he thinks he can't.*

A thought came to Abby, and she smiled. "Why don't we ask the magic if you can come?" she suggested.

"Ask—what?"

"Ask the magic. Go downstairs to the core and see if it will let you come inside the room. If it will, that means it recognizes you. That it thinks you're family. And then you could come after all."

"I don't know." Draco glanced over his shoulder at the sounds of people descending the stairs from the roof. "What if it doesn't like me?"

"It won't hurt you. It'll just stop you coming in. That's all it does to people who aren't family, make a shield across the door so they can't get in. It's where we would go if we didn't have time to get away from dementors, because even they couldn't get past those shields, especially not with all of us in the room to help make them stronger." She held out her hand to him again. "So, do you want to see it or not?"

Draco hesitated for a long moment, then put his hand in hers again. Abby grinned at him and squeezed tight before starting off.

The Manor's magic would let Draco in. She'd make sure of it.

---

Knowing Fidelus Manor was a real place made a difference, Draco found. Every difference between it and Malfoy Manor grated on his nerves. But, then, so did every similarity...

*Make up your mind.*

He snorted quietly at the acerbic tone of his inner scold.

*I suppose I want it to be more alike because then it feels more real to me. But I also want it to be more different because I want to keep the worlds separate in my mind. I don't want this place to lose everything that makes it different. That makes it better than home.*

The word sent his thoughts in a different direction. He barely noticed Abby leading him through a small door in the entrance hall.

*Where is my home now? Where do I belong?*

*I was born at Malfoy Manor, just like my ancestors for however many generations Lucius is*

*claiming for us now. I spend most of my time at Hogwarts these days, but I never doubted the Manor was my home.*

*Until now.*

*Until this.*

He reached out with his free hand to trail it along the stone of the passage walls, finding comfort in the familiar roughness.

*Lucius isn't my father anymore. Narcissa... she tries, but she's a few twigs short of a broom when it comes to being a mother. She certainly doesn't come up to Mum's standard. I don't know if I want to disown her completely, but she'd never be more than a distant aunt or cousin if reality matched the way I feel about things.*

*As for friends, the only ones I have are here. Which is pitiful, considering I've been here for a grand total of a week.*

Abby looked over her shoulder with her flashing smile, which Draco returned.

*But everyone here has made me feel welcome. Made me feel at home.*

They turned into a small side room.

*I think this is my home now.*

*If the magic will let it be.*

“Draco, Abby, there you are,” said Moony, stepping out from behind a large, glowing stone pillar.

*Glowing?*

Draco looked again. The pillar was, indeed, shedding a silvery light.

*Is that...?*

“Excellent, this means we only have to wait for the littlest ones.” Moony waved them closer. “Come get to know the Manor's magic, Draco. It's been curious about you.”

*The magic. Of a house. Is curious about me.*

*Well, I suppose it means this is definitely my home now.*

*I could wish it was a little less insane, but then it wouldn't be nearly as much fun...*

## Be Careful 23: What You Hold Onto

Draco flattened his hand against the glowing pillar, which felt like cool and vibrating stone. He hoped it didn't mind his palm being slick with sweat. *I never did like introductions.*

“It has a pulse, like you do,” Moony said from behind him. “Try and match yours to it. That will bring you into contact with its mind.”

“The Manor has a mind?”

“Of sorts. It knows the difference between family and non-family, it can obey my orders, and sometimes it does things I don't expect. It's not likely to engage you in witty repartee, but it will recognize you and respond to you after this.”

Draco nodded. Most of his attention was on finding the pulse in the vibrations under his hand. *It just feels like random buzzing... wait, there, that was a pair of them. And another pair. Buzz-buzz. Buzz-buzz. Buzz-buzz. Slower than my heart's going right now—no surprise, with all the excitement I've had today so far...*

He thought of calming things, of a brook running through a forest, the dappled sunlight sparkling on its surface, the gurgle of the water as it fountained over the stones. He lay on a branch over that brook, watching the patterns in the swirling foam, and felt no need, no desire for anything other than this. Wants and wishes would return in time, but this place and this moment were sufficient unto themselves...

<*I see you.*>

The voice was slow, ancient, barely a voice at all, but Draco knew he'd been acknowledged somehow.

<*You are not like the others. Your blood is different, from far away. Thinned and changed, not always for the best. Still, you are of a line like that which has made me what I am. For their sake and for your own, you are welcome.*>

Well, thanks, Draco thought back, not sure if he were being sarcastic or not.

<*The fate of many rests with you.*> The voice had grown clearer, the words more distinct. <*Do not succumb to fear, but treasure joy and rescue love, and all may yet be well...*>

The contact cut off. Draco stood again in a cellar, staring at the dark outlines of his fingers against a silvery stone pillar.

“Rescue love,” he muttered, taking his hand away. “How'd it get caught in the first place?”

“What?” Abby said. Behind her, Jonathan scooped up his youngest sister as Nicki pattered into the room, babbling away in toddler.

“Nothing.” Draco hurried over to the wall to catch little Charlie just in time as he tried to fly off a shelf. “Thinking aloud, that's all.” He spun the boy in a complete circle and set him on his feet. “Stay,” he said, pointing a finger at a small snub nose.

Charlie folded his arms and pouted. “Dragons don't take orders.”

“Yes, they do.”

“Do not.”

“Do so. From...” Draco had a brainwave. “Other dragons. That's who dragons take orders from.”

“Aren't any other dragons here.”

“Yes, there is.” Ignoring the voice in the back of his head snickering at him, Draco pointed at himself. “What do you think my name means?”

Charlie chewed on his lip as he tried to figure this one out. Then his eyes went very wide, and he nodded hard, planting his feet and facing the center of the room, the very picture of “Stay”.

*Great. Now they're going to need me to tell him what to do all the time. Maybe I can convince him somebody else is a dragon too...*

The door of the room opened, and Professor Riddle entered, carrying his grandson Paul. His daughter, whom Draco hadn't met but whose name he thought was Morgan, was behind him with baby Aurora in her arms and Diana clinging to her robes, the little girl's eyes very wide as she took in the room. Clearly she hadn't been here before.

*Of course not, if they only use it for special things like a coming-of-age. She can't be more than four or five.*

Professor Riddle set Paul down and went to stand beside the door. Paul started tugging at his mother's arm, whining. “Mummy, up, up...”

Morgan cleared her throat.

Paul looked abashed. “Please, Mummy, I up?” he rephrased.

“Maybe.” Morgan looked around. “Yes. Here, you, dream-boy, what's your name.” She held out

Aurora, stirring in her sleep. “Take her.”

“Me?” Draco was appalled to hear his voice try to crack in the middle of the word. He covered with a cough and tried again. “Me? I don't really know how...”

“No better time to learn. Come here.” Shifting her daughter into the crook of one arm, Morgan briskly arranged Draco's arms into a semblance of a cradle, then laid Aurora in them. “Keep her head supported,” she ordered, bending with a wince to lift Paul onto one hip. “And for God's sake don't look so stiff. She's a baby, not an erumpent horn.”

*I think I'd rather hold an erumpent horn.*

Draco knew better than to say this out loud, but his panic was mounting. What if the baby woke up and screamed? What if she startled him and he dropped her? What if he held her the wrong way and hurt her?

*I don't know what I'm doing, this was a bad idea, you really shouldn't trust me with something this important—*

Abby laid a hand on his elbow. “Don't be scared,” she whispered. “Your body will tell her that you're scared and then she'll be scared too. Just hold her like you would anything you didn't want to lose. Close, but gentle, and relaxed.”

Draco avoided commenting on the ease of words as opposed to actions and focused on the content of the advice. *I need to relax. What's relaxing to think about?*

*Well, I'm here, live and in person.* He smiled at the mock-announcer tone his thought had taken for those few words. *No one's going to hurt me or lock me up anywhere. The people and the magic both accept me. It's almost like—*

*No, it's not 'like'. I do belong here.*

Aurora turned her head in her sleep and nuzzled against his robes. Without thinking, Draco swayed where he stood, and the baby sighed and settled back into her slumber.

*And I'm not too bad at this. I still don't want to deal with her awake and crying, or changing a nappy or anything, but just holding her doesn't seem too hard...*

*I shouldn't have thought that, should I.*

A knock on the door made him jump, and Aurora startled awake. Quickly, Draco made shushing sounds towards her, falling back into the swaying motion he'd used earlier. Aurora's tiny face wrinkled, her mouth opened—

In a huge yawn, and closed again without uttering a sound.

*That was close.*

Still rocking the baby, he watched as Professor Riddle opened the door. “Who seeks to enter here, and why?” the man asked in a calm, assured tone.

“I am Reynard, son of the house of Beauvoi and the line of Slytherin,” Ray answered from outside. “I seek to enter and claim my birthright.”

“I am Hermione, daughter of the house of Beauvoi and the line of Slytherin,” Neenie seconded. “I too seek to enter and claim my birthright.”

“Of whose line within the house of Beauvoi do you come?” Professor Riddle challenged.

“We are the oldest children of Remus, Lord Beauvoi, and of his wife Gertrude,” Ray said, his voice ringing clear with pride.

“To this we swear by hand, wand, and life,” Neenie added, “for our faces and our hearts both proclaim it for all to know.”

Professor Riddle inclined his head, then spoke a few hissing words that filled the whole room with sound. Ray and Neenie replied in chorus, their faces blank as though they were thinking hard.

*Or remembering a script. I wonder how often they've practiced this?*

When they had finished, Professor Riddle bowed his head again. “You have spoken nothing but the truth,” he said. “Enter, then, and claim your birthright, the governing of the magic of this Manor.”

He stepped aside. Ray and Neenie joined hands and entered the room side by side, Danger behind them. Moony came forward from where he had been waiting by the wall and held up a hand to stop the twins advancing any farther.

“Today you are man and woman by our law,” he said. “I congratulate you.” That which the formal words could not say, his eyes did, shining brilliant blue in the silver light of the pillar. “Though it is not the custom for anyone but the direct heir to share in the Lord's control of the Manor-core, in these dangerous times I believe it necessary to bestow this mixed blessing upon you both. Receive it with all due caution, for injudicious use of this power has killed Lords and heirs before their time in years gone by.”

Ray and Neenie gave quick nods. Neither of them seemed able to take their eyes from the pillar, which had increased its light until it seemed a full moon had risen in the center of the room.

“Come forward, then, and lay your hands on this pillar, the foundation of our home and the receptacle of our family's magic.”

Ray placed his right hand, Neenie her left, on the pillar's surface. The other two hands were still clasped between them. Danger brushed her lips quickly against each child's cheek, then joined the other spectators at the side of the room, lifting Nicki into her arms so that the girl could see what was happening.

Moony walked around the pillar until he reached the opposite side from the twins. Laying both his hands against the stone, he stared into the glow and began to speak in Parseltongue.

“He says, ‘O magic of this home, magic of my ancestors, come to these my children,’” Abby translated in a whisper for Draco. “‘Teach them your use and grant them your power, that they may guard and guide the lives entrusted to them both in union with me and after I am gone. So I speak, so I intend, and so let it be done!’”

The pillar's light began to pulse, and its vibrations grew louder in time with the pulsation, until Draco could have imagined that it was a great silver heart, the core of Fidelus Manor that Abby had named it. With each pulse, a wash of silver rolled over Neenie and Ray, starting at the hands which rested on the pillar, meeting at the hands by which they clung to one another, and rippling back across the two until they could barely be seen for the light which played about them. The rhythm of the giant heart grew louder and faster, the shining silver glowed brighter—

The room plunged into darkness. It would have been silent if not for Nicki, Diana, and Paul all shrieking, Charlie yelling in gleeful terror, and Draco swearing. Aurora, in his arms, woke at the noise and started to cry.

*This is what I was afraid of—she's squirming, I'm going to drop her—*

Some instinct warned Draco to pull his head back, and he felt the wind generated by the passage of a tiny fist just beyond the end of his nose.

*That would have hurt.*

*But the original problem still stands—*

“Here, let me take her,” said Danger beside him, and strong hands found his arms, slid under the flailing baby, and lifted her deftly away. “I know, I know, it got all dark and people made noise and you didn't like it, but now it will be all right, just as soon as your silly cousins get their wits about them and *turn the lights back on...*”

“Yes, Mother,” said two voices from the direction of the pillar, and a weak silver light flickered into being.

Ray looked as if he'd been through a four-hour Quidditch match without a break, and Hermione as though she'd been up studying all night, but they were grinning at each other like kneazles who'd found the main entrance to the gnome tunnels. Moony stepped out from behind the pillar to give them both a searching look.

“And just what did you do with all that power you pulled?” he asked in his politest tone.

The twins looked as if they were about to quail, but Neenie squared her shoulders. “We were resetting the wards on the house, Father,” she said.

“Resetting the wards on the house.” Moony spoke the words delicately, as if he were tasting

them. “Why, pray tell? Since we have decided to remain at Hogwarts for the time being, why go to the effort of placing wards on a house we will not occupy?”

“Because someone else might come here, and need a safe place,” Ray said. His eyes flicked for the barest instant to Draco. “Someone might not have a choice about being here, and the dementors shouldn't be allowed to get at that person just because we don't want to maintain wards on the Manor when we're not using it.”

“Besides, it will be less work when we come home for Christmas,” Neenie added. “And less dangerous if we need to pop in for a few minutes to get something.”

“Or someone.” Moony nodded slowly. “Well done, in that case. Your release was sloppy, but that comes with practice, and we will discuss it at another time. For now, rest and let the Manor help you recover.” He held out his arms. The twins embraced him, and he them. “I am proud to be your father.”

*Draco looked away, feeling a twinge of envy. Stupid of me—after they've practically drained themselves warding this place again on the off chance I might show up, I'm going to go wanting what they have? Great way to say thanks, Draco. Really great.*

“Don't be sad,” Abby whispered beside him. “You're our family now, remember? He's your father too. If you want him.”

“Thanks,” Draco whispered back, still watching Moony with the twins.

*I do, but I don't, at the same time. I'd be intruding, wouldn't I? He's got enough children to take care of, he doesn't need me barging in. I have Mum. She's enough.*

*So enough wasting time being sad about things. It's time to party.*

*And then later, when I go back where I came from, I can see just how closely my two worlds are related...*

## Be Careful 24: What You Dance To

When Ray and Neenie had recovered from draining themselves, the Beauvois led the way upstairs, Draco following them. Abby had claimed his arm, and Charlie had firm hold of his other hand.

*I hope they're planning to let go at some point...*

Professor Riddle and his daughter and grandchildren walked behind them, though Diana scurried forward as soon as they were out of the stairs and into the wide main floor hallway and held out her hand to Charlie. The Dragon looked at the girl, then at Draco. His expression was equal parts bafflement and uncertainty.

*He's a little young, but girls don't bite. Usually.* Draco nodded to the boy and produced the best reassuring smile he could on short notice. It must have been good enough, as Charlie straightened his shoulders and gallantly offered Diana his elbow.

*A bit rough, but he'll learn.* Draco watched the miniature couple trot away down the hall. It took him a few moments to realize he was still smiling.

*They're cute, he rationalized. Everyone smiles at cute kids.*

*It's just, your definition of 'kids' changes as you get older...*

A soft cough from behind him reminded him that he was still supposed to be walking. He hurried ahead, Abby keeping pace beside him easily, bouncing on her toes. “Promise to dance with me once before you go?” she whispered.

“Are you sure there'll be dancing? I don't want to make a promise I can't keep.”

Abby scoffed. “It's a party. There's always dancing.”

*Somehow I thought so.* “All right. If they play a song I know, I'll dance with you.”

“Thank you!” Abby squeezed his arm.

They came past the main staircase and to the front doors, where Moony and Danger were standing. Danger stepped aside to allow Draco and Abby passage along one side, and Abby guided Draco to a spot on the edge of the front walk. Draco glanced around him—nearly everyone he

knew in this world was standing on the lawn. Harry and Ginny, a few feet from him, waved when they saw him, waited for his return wave, then went back to watching the doors.

*Probably some grand entrance is traditional. Except in this case it's a grand exit...*

“My friends!” Moony called out, pitching his voice to carry. “Today the heirs of my house and line come of age! Today they are a man and a woman!”

“Many of you were here to welcome them into the world when they were born,” Danger took over, her smile wide but her eyes shimmering. “Welcome them now with us into their new world of adulthood!”

“My daughter!” Moony held out a hand, and Neenie stepped out the door into the sun. “Hermione Jeanette Beauvoi!”

“My son!” Danger called Ray forward with her own outstretched hand, and he joined his twin in the light. “Reynard Alexander Beauvoi!”

Ray and Neenie joined hands and lifted their arms on high.

The cheer that greeted them shook the ground under Draco's feet.

After a moment, the twins glanced at each other with secret smiles, then released their hands and turned outward, leaving the hand now forward—Neenie's right and Ray's left—upthrust. Both hands were fisted, and the wrists held stiffly.

*It almost looks like they expect something to come and—*

A scream from above, and a red-and-brown blur descended on Neenie. The crowd gasped. Draco took a step back. Abby jumped, then giggled. “He always surprises me when he does that!”

“He?” Draco stared at the hawk which was now settling onto Neenie's wrist, shifting its weight from one foot to the other and mantling its wings. “Is that a person?”

“Mm-hmm.” Abby shifted back and forth herself. Draco put a hand on her shoulder, and she quieted. “Now we just have to wait for...”

With silent grace, a snowy owl landed neatly on Ray's outstretched arm, folding her wings and ruffling all her feathers. Ray stroked her head, and she stretched out her neck and nibbled at his fingers. “Friends,” he called, his voice sounding very like his father's. “I give you those who will help us to carry our house forward to the future!”

“The mother of the next generation of Beauvois, and the father of their cousins!” Neenie added, though her cheeks pinked as she said it. “Welcome them as part of our family, as we, the heirs, already have!”

“Except for those of us for whom that would be incest,” Ginny murmured. Harry rapped a finger

on the top of her head, and she snapped her teeth at it.

Draco focused his attention on the grass at his feet. *I really didn't need to think about that...*

A cheer brought his eyes back up. The birds, held high side by side, bated their wings and gave voice, hawk's challenge cry and owl's hunting scream mingling in what almost sounded like harmony.

*It probably is. They're human under the feathers, and I already knew they could sing. Why wouldn't they try it in their other forms?*

“And now—” Ray tossed Luna into the air, and she soared once around his head and landed beside him as a human again. “To the celebration!”

Neenie leaned back and flung Ron high. He flapped his way level with the second floor windows and popped back into human form. The crowd gasped.

*Is he mad? He'll fall—*

But Ron snapped his left wrist twice, then swung a leg around the thing which appeared in his hand and leaned into his dive, leveling off three feet above the ground.

“Where'd he get that?” Draco asked Abby as Ron pulled his broom to a halt beside Neenie.

“It's his portable one. Pocket size. He was so happy the day he saved up enough to get it.” Abby was watching the scene eagerly. “Is he going to—I think he's going to—”

Ron hooked an arm around Neenie's waist and lifted. She squealed as she was draped across the broom, and again as it lifted off.

“Oi!” Ray shook his fist at Ron. “Come back here with my sister!”

“I don't have to,” Ron called down, flying lazy circles above. Neenie squirmed her way upright and got a leg over the broomstick, her robes flapping back over Ron's, the two shades of blue blending with the sky above. “I'm legal, and now so is she.”

“I don't like the sound of that,” Ray said darkly.

“You don't have to like anything,” Neenie informed him. She turned back to Ron. “Shall we?”

“Are you sure you want to?” This was in a quieter tone than the rest, and Draco got the feeling it hadn't been meant to be overheard. “It's your decision. I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do.”

Neenie peered at the sun. “Can we get there and back before dark?”

“On this baby?” Ron patted the side of the broom with affection. “Easily.”

“Then yes. I'm sure.” Neenie leaned back and whispered something into Ron's ear. Whatever it was, it made him turn a red almost indistinguishable from his hair, and the broom leaped forward as if stung by a billiwig.

“Where're you going?” Harry shouted after the rapidly receding figures.

“Where do you think?” Neenie's voice shrilled back. “Gretna Green!”

“What?” Ray yelped, his voice almost lost in the spontaneous cheer that went up from the crowd. On the front steps, Moony and Danger looked at one another, then out at their friends. Draco followed their line of sight and came up with the Weasleys, Mr. Weasley looking fondly after his son's broom, Mrs. Weasley not sure whether to be embarrassed or proud.

Abby was grinning ear to ear. “My sister's a Weasley,” she chanted. “My sister's a Weasley!”

“Not yet she's not,” Draco contradicted. “It's a long way to Gretna Green.”

“She will be soon,” Abby said with confidence.

That, Draco couldn't gainsay. He chose to change the subject instead. “Where's this dancing going to be?”

“Probably right out here.” Abby stood on her tiptoes, trying to see over the heads of the crowd.

“Come here.” Draco went to one knee and patted his back. “I'll give you a boost.”

Abby looped her arms over his shoulders and her legs around his waist, and Draco stood up, staggering a pace. Harry's arm went out to catch him. “Fast worker, isn't he?” the image of Draco's nemesis remarked, his eyes still on his friends' dwindling forms.

*Ah yes. Surreality, how much fun it is.* Draco hooked his own arms under Abby's legs and lifted her a bit higher. *Though at this point, it might be surreal to me to see the real Potter, or my world's version of him, because he'd probably try to kill me, and I've got used to this...*

“Yeah, I guess,” he answered belatedly. “You didn't know?”

“I did,” said Ginny.

“Of course you did,” Harry grumbled. “You know everything. And you never tell me any of it.”

“Because you'd be able to figure it out on your own if you'd just try.”

Abby squirmed, and Draco removed his arms. She slid down his back and landed lightly on her feet. “That way,” she proclaimed, pointing. “And we need to hurry—they're going to play the Rainbow Reel!”

“The Rainbow Reel!” Ginny's eyes lit up, and she grabbed Harry's hand and darted off across the

lawn, dragging him for a few steps until he found his pace and caught up with her. “Bags we red ones!”

Draco looked back at Abby, who was watching him eagerly.

*I wish she wouldn't do that. It makes me feel like I'm kicking a puppy.*

“I'm... not sure I know it,” he admitted. “How does it go?”

Abby began to whistle. Draco listened carefully. “Hold up,” he said after a few bars. “Try that bit again, slower.”

“But that's how fast it goes!”

“I know. Try it slower anyway. And without the bounce in it.”

“That's no fun.” Abby whistled it anyway, slow and determinedly square. “There. Happy?”

Draco grinned. “I am.” *And I really am.*

“Why?”

“Because I know it after all. If it starts like this.” Draco took Abby's hands and swung her back and forth, as though he were the center and she the outside of an imaginary circle, then stepped gravely outward and held his hands wide as if clasping others in the circle realized.

“Yes!” Abby leapt into the air. “Yes, that's how it starts! But it goes much faster than that—do you know it slow?”

“That's how I learned it. But I think I can keep up with it.”

“Are you sure?” Abby giggled. “It goes really, really fast...”

“I'll manage,” Draco said quellingly. “Unless you don't want to dance with me after all.”

Abby covered her mouth with both hands and shook her head hard.

“No, you don't want to dance? What a shame.” Draco turned away, nose in the air.

“Draco!” Abby protested, her voice half a whine.

Draco looked over his shoulder at her. “What do you say, then?”

“Please? Pretty please? With sugar and a broomstick on top?”

“I can't resist a pretty girl who says pretty please.” Draco held out his hand. “Let's go dance the Rainbow Reel.”

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*Swing your partner, circle up, around we go and split in time, girls spin out and boys come in, then switch around and circle again...*

The steps of the Rainbow Reel, so called because each dancer wore a scarf in a color denoting which of the six original circles he or she had started in, were still working themselves out of Draco's feet the next morning, back at Malfoy Manor. He'd learned the dance as a solemn and slow-paced pattern, one of the things every modern pureblood groaned inwardly to hear the music for. Speeded up, it was almost intoxicating.

*Spin around and come away, find your partner and take their hand, circle 'round them once or twice, make a line of only two...*

They'd danced it twice the day before, once in the morning and again when Ron and Neenie, flushed and triumphant, returned late in the afternoon to face congratulations and parental scrutiny. Even Mrs. Weasley, after a few motherly huffs, had had to admit neither of them had done anything wrong, and had hugged Hermione and wished them both all the best.

*Pass a line and make them four, go between another set, little circle and spin out to nice long lines of boys and girls...*

Draco danced down the hallway, half-hoping someone would come across him and ask what he was doing. He could have used the entertainment of their face to take his mind off what he was thinking of doing today. As it was, the dance steps were doing a halfway decent job of that, but he kept coming back to it.

*Spin your partner 'round again, every boy now take a knee, lead your partner right around and stand back up to dance some more...*

Flourishing his arm as though a green scarf were still tied there, Draco let the skipping steps of the interweaving lines carry him to the stairs and down them. Halfway down, though, voices from below stopped him cold.

“...sure it will be tonight, Severus?”

“Quite sure, my lord. Fletcher told me so himself. They will have quite a few members of the Order on hand to defend Potter, of course.”

“Then we shall simply have to outnumber them.” The Dark Lord laughed. “Excellent work, Severus.”

“I live to serve, my lord.”

Draco shuddered inwardly, pressing against the wall as if it could hide him.

*After what I'm going to try, it might. If it works. If it's real.*

But Fidelus Manor and Malfoy Manor were in the same place, had the same layout and rooms, seemed to have started off as the same thing. Somewhere along the timeline, one had split away from the other, but as long as no one had purposefully changed it, the room he was looking for should exist in this house as it did in the other.

*But will what's inside it?*

*Only one way to find out.*

The voices below were gone. Touching the memory of a laughing Abby dancing her way around him for courage, Draco started down the rest of the stairs, headed for the cellar.

*Time to see if Malfoy Manor still has a Manor-core...*

## Be Careful 25: What You Spy On

The cellar was dark enough that Draco could imagine, for a few moments, that he was still at Fidelus Manor. He'd been sent downstairs to fetch something, an extra chair for the supper table, perhaps, and he'd be returning in triumph with it in just a moment.

*And Mum will chuckle at me and applaud for me. It's a shame I didn't get to see her this time, but she had a case at St. Mungo's she couldn't leave, and I'll be back...*

Draco's musings came to an abrupt end as he reached the place he remembered turning with Abby. The corridor he needed was...

Gone. Not just blocked off, but gone. As if there had never been a corridor there at all.

*There must have been. It can't be the same in everything except that.*

Draco began to feel along the stones of the wall where he recalled the opening being. They felt like stones—cold, rough, hard, and not inclined to give him the least bit of hope.

*Of course, with magic, someone easily could have sealed off the corridor, and then made it look just like the rest of the wall. Which is probably what happened.*

Draco slid his left hand over another block.

His fingers disappeared.

“Ah-ha!” He wiggled his hand cautiously. Though it looked as though it were disappearing into solid stone, around it he could feel nothing but air.

*Now to see how big this opening is...*

It was, as it turned out, the right size for a skinny teenager to squeeze through.

*This is starting to make me nervous. But onwards.*

Draco lit his wand and started down the corridor.

---

“Lucius?” said the Dark Lord, frowning as the wizard strolled into the briefing room for those Death Eaters going out on the ambush mission. “Perhaps I was not clear—”

“Draco is graciously allowing me to borrow his wand for the night, my lord,” Lucius interrupted politely, bowing. “If you feel I would do better to remain behind, of course, I shall, but it would give me great pleasure to help you on this special night.”

Lord Voldemort smiled. “By all means, then. Join us. Where is your devoted son, by the by, since you have brought him up?”

“Somewhere in the house,” Lucius said, waving a dismissive hand. “Enjoying his newfound freedom.”

The dozen or so Death Eaters in the room cackled.

“How long will that last?” Bellatrix asked, grinning. “Until he cheeks you again?”

“Come, come, Bella,” the Dark Lord reproved. “Even Draco Malfoy must learn better at some point. Now that he has finally realized that his father will deliver on those promises of pain if he is not a good little boy, he will amend his behavior accordingly. Besides, in a few weeks, Draco will no longer be Lucius’ problem, or not directly so.” His eyes went to Snape, sitting by himself against one wall. “Do you think you can deal with him, Severus?”

“I have coped for the past six years,” Snape said dryly. “The additional power which will be mine as Headmaster can only aid me. I shall, somehow, survive it.”

“And since we have that settled, let us begin.” Voldemort unrolled a large map with a flick of his wand, and the Death Eaters bent to study it. “Lucius, since you are a last-minute addition, I believe I will ask the favor of your company personally...”

---

*And here it is.*

Draco stared at the door, swallowing hard. A gesture he’d seen from a few of his otherworld friends came to mind, a motion they seemed to make when they were upset or nervous.

*Can’t hurt.*

He rubbed his thumbnail against his forehead, up-down-back-forth, then put it to his lips. “Here we go, then,” he muttered aloud.

The door swung open of its own accord.

Within it stood a stone pillar. The surface was polished to a glossy smoothness, but there was no light coming from it at all.

*Or none that I can see with my wand lit like this...*

“Nox.”

Purple and orange afterimages danced across Draco’s sight in the moment after the light went out. He let them. His eyes would adjust soon enough—

*There. I was wrong. It is glowing. But it’s so faint.*

*I wonder if that’s because no one has been here for a few hundred years?*

*Maybe I should stop standing here and wondering and just go inside and ask it myself.*

Gingerly, he stepped across the threshold.

The light in the pillar brightened ever so slightly as he did. The floor, now visible, was empty, if covered in an inch or two of dust.

*I’ll have to clean up thoroughly before I go back upstairs, or Lucius will have this whole story out of me before you can say wand.*

*Not that he’d believe it even if I spilled, so there’s really no danger...*

*Of course there’s no Danger. She’s in the other world.*

Draco grinned at his own terrible pun and quickly, before he could change his mind, strode across to the pillar and laid a hand against it.

“Hello,” he said under his breath, trying to sense the pulse of the thing as he had at Fidelus Manor. “My name’s Draco, Draco Malfoy. What’s yours?”

*Do you have a name? Are you even still in there? I thought I felt something while I was talking, but I’m not sure. Still, the door did open when I spoke up...*

“You like talking? Want me to talk to you? I can do that.” Draco put his wand away and placed his other hand against the pillar as well. “Like Mum does with me some mornings, talking me awake to get me up and moving. My real mum, the one who helped me, the one who loves me.” Thinking of her, even missing her, brought a smile to his face. “The lady upstairs, well, she does her best. But she doesn’t understand. She can’t. Because somewhere along the way, something went very wrong in our world, and people like her and me are the result.”

<Youuuu?> rumbled a voice at the edge of his awareness. It sounded like a half-awake giant.

“Meeeeee.” Draco channeled part of his surge of elation into a moment of silliness and the rest into enough strength to speak the truth. “I’m an inbred, overbearing, cowardly loser who just happened to make a wish that got him things he doesn’t deserve. Things like a second chance. Like friends. Like a world where I don’t have to choose between serving a master I hate and admitting my entire life has been a sham. Which it has, but there are people I’d rather not say that in front of.”

<Nooooo.>

“No? No what?”

<Youuuu...>

The surface of the pillar in front of Draco’s face flashed bright silver, then cleared to show him his reflection. “Yes,” he said slowly. “Yes, that’s me.”

<Strooong.>

“Who, me?” Draco snorted. “Not likely. I never was, and I think it’s a bit late to learn.”

<Strooong,> the voice insisted, and Draco’s reflection disappeared, to be replaced with a scene from his memory—the moment, just yesterday, when he’d faced down Lucius and won back his freedom.

“Stronger, maybe,” Draco temporized. “Better than I was. But I’m still not strong.”

<Learning.>

“I guess. But it’s going to take a long time to fix everything that’s wrong with me. My whole life, really. And I’ll never be done, not like finishing an essay or a test.” The enormity of the task threatened to overwhelm Draco for a moment. Who was he, to try to change the life to which he’d been born and bred?

<Life...> the voice mused, the stone growing no warmer where Draco’s palms touched it, though the dull silver the mirror had faded into was pulsing to the beat of his heart. <Your life.>

“My life? Yes, it is.”

<You decide it.>

“I wonder why that sounds familiar,” Draco muttered. “So, that’s me. What about you?”

<Slept long.> The mirror brightened again, blurred faces flashing across it too quickly for Draco to get a good look at any of them. <Remember these, but long ago. Long and long. You... belong, and not.>

“And not? What’s that supposed to mean?”

<Not like others. Blood has changed. Not always for best.>

“Just in case I had any doubts left about whether or not you’re the same as the one at Fidelus Manor.” Draco sighed. “All right. We’ve established that my blood, pure though it may be, is not much to your liking. Still, I’m the best you’re going to get. Can we work together?”

<Yes.> The answer was immediate. <But...>

“But?”

<Your magic tastes of far away.>

“It should.” Draco shut his eyes and imagined this cellar filled with Beauvois and Riddles, imagined Abby standing next to him and Aurora in his arms again.

<You want to stay far away. To leave here.>

“I—well—yeah. I do.” Trying to lie to something that could read his mind would probably have been one of the more pointless things Draco had ever done. *And I’ve pulled some stupid stunts in my time.*

<There is no other.> Silver light flashed, visible even through Draco’s eyelids, and he opened his eyes to see a picture of Lucius on the mirror-bright bit of pillar, edged in dirty red and shrinking even as he watched. <No other but this, and he would take and never give. Yes?>

“Yes.” Draco felt his stomach start to sink. *If it wants me to stay, to live in it properly again, to make it the way it should be...*

<Old,> the voice said, and somehow Draco knew it meant itself, not him or Lucius, whose face vanished to be replaced by a picture of the Manor. <Sad. Tired. Want to sleep. Sleep forever.>

“Sleep for—you want to die?” *What do you do for a suicidal house?*

<Yes. But help you first. If you will promise.>

“Promise what?”

<Before you go, into your far away.> The Manor in the picture crumbled in on itself, clouds of dust billowing outward from it. <Make this real. Then sleep will come, forever.>

“Knock the house down?” Draco stared at the picture, appalled, but beginning to be intrigued. “How?”

<Magic will help. Come. Learn.>

The light within the pillar pulsed three times under Draco’s hands, and the world as he knew it vanished. He floated in a sea of light, at the same time weightless and impossibly massive, free to dance anywhere he chose and immobile as a stone—

*Or a house.*

*This is what it’s like to be a magical house—to be Malfoy Manor, no less!*

<Yes,> the voice agreed. <Now you learn.>

Draco learned. His skin against a wall or floor anywhere in the Manor would allow him to see what was happening anywhere else in the house or on the grounds. Two points of contact, and some of his own magic added, let him move things around. He experimented, grinning wickedly to himself, in rooms where some of the senior Death Eaters were working on plans.

<No one will know you do this,> the voice commented as Aunt Bella's hand "slipped" on the doorknob and the door thudded against her forehead. <This magic can be traced only by one of the blood who knows it is here.>

*More incentive not to tell Father anything. In case I needed it.*

Vision and movement weren't the only things he could get the Manor to do, Draco found. If he went into full contact, found another person inside the house, and spoke aloud, his words would be magically reproduced for that person to hear.

*And no one else. Very convenient. Hard to pull off if there's other people in the room with me, but maybe if I lean back against the wall and look bored, like I'm criticizing what's going on under my breath...*

<You begin well,> the voice said after what felt like days. <Enough for now. Come back when you are rested.>

"Fine by me," Draco croaked, blinking in surprise as he heard the words with his own ears. He was standing in the cellar again, both hands on the pillar, staring at the mirrored section which showed his face, a bit dusty and drawn but otherwise unchanged.

*That can't have taken as long as it felt like. But I did learn a lot, and I do need a nap. Then I can stay up tonight to work on understanding more, and updating my journal.*

<Wait,> the voice said as he was about to remove his hands from the pillar. <A gift.>

The mirror flashed. A small, four-legged creature scampered across a grassy plain. Its body was long and low-slung, its nose pointed, its fur a pale pearl grey. When it stood up on its hind legs to look around it, its upper lip lifted to reveal pointed teeth.

"What is it?" Draco asked. *Got a similar shape to a weasel— he grimaced—or a ferret, but I don't think it's either of those...*

<You,> the voice said simply.

The picture vanished, the light died out, and Draco knew he would get nothing more from the magic of Malfoy Manor today.

*And now I'm left with a mystery. What was that thing, and why is it me? Is it some kind of symbol? Am I going to be transfigured again?*

He shrugged and left the room, closing the door behind him. The answer would come in its own time.

*And Lucius is probably looking for me, to get my wand for tonight. Wonder where he is?*

A quick hand on the stones of the wall, and an image floated behind Draco's eyelids. Lucius sat on a sofa with Narcissa beside him, hands and lips busily exploring—

“Gah!” Draco yanked his hand away as if the wall had burned him. “Must remember that. Possibility of very, very nasty sights. Use with caution.”

*On the other hand, if I time this just right, I can embarrass the hell out of them both.*

Draco snickered and set off to do exactly that.

This had the potential to be a great deal of fun.

## Be Careful 26: Whom You Show Love

Draco lay on the floor of his bedroom, his Charms book open in front of him, the very picture of a studious young wizard finishing up his summer homework before school started again the next day.

*Or that's what anybody who might see me ought to think.*

In reality, the edge of the book formed the top of a screen like that of a Muggle television, with Draco's bare forearms as the sides and a line between his elbows the bottom. Tiny voices spoke from the figures moving in its depths, voices and figures that only he could see or hear, as he had found out two weeks before when Narcissa had accidentally walked in on him viewing a meeting on the wall above his desk.

*She thought I looked so startled because I hadn't heard her coming, and I was sure she was about to ask me how I'd made the picture move and have sound, but she never looked at it at all, not even when Rowle started yelling...*

Draco grinned savagely at the thought of the blond man who had looked at him with a wary respect ever since the first of August. *Wrong it may have been, but that was fun. He was one of the biggest bastards to me after Hogwarts, so I can't say I'm sorry I got to hit him with a few Cruciatuses. And that the Dark Lord commanded me to do it, and he and Lucius were obviously both expecting me to refuse or go over all faint, was the foam on the butterbeer...*

The grin turned into a snicker as Draco recalled the look on the elder Malfoy's face.

*He looked like he'd just heard Mad-Eye Moody was back from the dead and looking to get his wand back.*

An uneasy shiver prickled between Draco's shoulder blades. He'd never liked the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher—being turned into a ferret by someone tended to do that—and even finding out Moody'd been impersonated the entire year by the younger Barty Crouch hadn't changed Draco's opinion, because in order to do a good impersonation, Crouch had had to act exactly as the real Moody would have, which meant the real Moody would have done the same. Still, it had been Draco's wand that had taken Moody's life, even if Lucius had been the one wielding it at the time, and Draco wasn't sure he was happy with that.

*At least it means I get it back for good. It won't be doing any more killing.*

A loud cough from within the picture drew Draco's attention back to it, and he shook off thoughts of dead Aurors and Death Eaters in favor of live ones.

“Report,” said the Dark Lord, settling himself into his chair.

“All is in readiness for the school year, my lord,” said Snape's voice from down the table. “News of my appointment by the board of governors should be released tomorrow, along with those of Alecto and Amycus. We shall ensure the students are... properly treated, and that the other teachers do not interfere.”

*“Properly treated.” Right. Draco made a face at the tiny figure of the new headmaster of Hogwarts. I get the feeling I'm going to be glad I can pretend this year is nothing but a nightmare.*

“Harry Potter?” the Dark Lord asked, looking to the other side of the table.

“We continue to watch the house, my lord,” said the voice of a Death Eater Draco knew only by sight. “Or the place where it should be—we cannot see the house itself due to the Fidelius Charm still active on it, as you well know...” A gasp of pain.

“If I know it, you have no need to repeat it,” said the Dark Lord in a bored tone. “If nothing has changed, report that in plain language and let us move on.”

“Nothing has changed, my lord!” the man babbled instantly. “No sign of Potter or anyone else, none at all, it's been a week since we thought we caught a glimpse of anything!”

“So if they are present, they are being quite careful.” The Dark Lord tapped his fingertips together. “A pity. Yaxley, what news of Potter's friends?”

“The Granger Mudblood disappeared the same night Potter did, my lord,” Yaxley answered from his place across the table from Snape. “Dolohov and Rowle reported she was with him in the café where they found him, but they also reported the youngest Weasley brat was there, and he's since been sighted at home with spattergroit...”

“So we cannot be certain,” the Dark Lord finished. “She will be a hindrance to him, if they are together. Rabastan, see about finding her family—broadcasting that we have them could draw the girl out of hiding, and Potter with her.”

“Of course, my lord,” answered the younger Lestrangle brother from near the foot of the table.

“Potter's other friends are preparing for Hogwarts as usual,” Yaxley picked up his narrative again. “The Weasley girl and the Longbottom boy seem the most likely to start trouble—the Lovegood girl might as well, if she can ever stop mooning over the ridiculous long enough to notice the real world.”

“There is nothing wrong with believing in dreams,” Draco said through gritted teeth as the table

laughed uproariously. “If Luna wants to think a few things are real that aren't, what harm is that to you?”

*Strange, how fast I can switch allegiances. Two months ago, I'd have been in there laughing with them, and now I'm defending her, if where no one can hear me...*

“But it's not really strange at all, if you think about it another way,” he murmured aloud. “I'm a Malfoy born and bred. We follow the side that gives us the greatest advantage. And I sure as hell wasn't getting any great advantage out of this lot.”

*Lucius's lessons, the reason I've become a warrior for the light.*

*Life, thy name is irony.*

He snickered to himself, then returned to watching. It would be his last chance for a while, and he wanted to gather as much information as he could.

*Don't know how I'm going to get it to anyone who can use it, but I might be able to sabotage a few plans myself. Quietly, of course. My objective here is to survive the war—not that it wasn't always, but now I have an actual reason for it instead of “living is probably better than dying”.*

*And I know where I have to be, and when...*

The great magical minds of the other world had considered the problem, then tested their hypothesis and been proven tentatively correct. It seemed that the Dark Lord himself was the cause of the magical imbalance which had allowed Draco to make his first jump.

*Makes sense. It was him I wanted to get away from so badly, him and everything he stands for. Without him, I'd still have been a spoiled pureblood brat, but that might not have meant I had to learn to be actively evil. Just closed-minded and stuck-up.*

Since the Dark Lord was the cause of the imbalance, it followed that his death, if and when it occurred, would end Draco's ability to change worlds in his sleep. Whichever world he was in at the moment Lord Voldemort died, that was the world where he would stay.

*Which means I am now Harry Potter's biggest fan—as long as he doesn't succeed too quickly for me to cast a sleep spell on myself before he finishes it!*

Grinning, Draco thumped the heels of his shoes together, thinking of the two films he'd watched with his friends on his last visit. “There's no place like home,” he chanted, “there's no place like home...”

Chanting changed to whistling, a jaunty tune about the proper thing to be if one wanted to succeed. It wasn't necessary to be intelligent, the song claimed, or even to know very much at all. The only requirement was to be well-liked.

Draco glanced down at the meeting again. *Or at least to have the power to make people pretend*

*they like you.*

“And with an assist from me, to be who you'll be, instead of dreary who you were, um, are...” he sang under his breath, then changed the tune entirely, to something he needed to know better. “With catlike tread, upon our way we steal; in silence dread, our cautious way we feel...”

The Pirates of Penzance was opening tomorrow night, and Abby had hatched a plan to get Draco into the cast. The other person involved had agreed, on the condition that both Draco and Abby now owed him a favor, and Draco had been practicing like mad ever since to be sure he'd be ready.

*Making a fool of myself there might not be as lethal as it is here, but it would be far more embarrassing.*

Besides, his mum would be there, and he wanted to give her a good show.

*It's been ridiculous. Every single time I've managed to get there in my body, she's been somewhere else—all right, it's only been twice since Ray and Neenie's coming of age, but still. I haven't been able to hug Mum properly for more than a month...*

Draco stopped for a moment to examine the probable response if anyone should ever happen to hear him say this aloud.

---

Narcissa, coming upstairs to call Draco to dinner, found him lying on the floor of his bedroom, hooting in helpless laughter, though he refused to explain why.

“Sorry, Mother,” he said, giving her a smile that reminded her painfully of his earliest childhood, when he had sometimes managed to sneak out of his nursery and find her elsewhere in the house. “It'd take too long to give you all the background.”

“If you ever care to take the time, I could use a reason to laugh,” Narcissa said, laying a hand on her son's shoulder.

“I'll remember that.” Draco turned towards the door, then, as if on impulse, turned back and hugged her. Narcissa managed not to stiffen in shock, which he would have felt as rejection, and hugged him back after only the slightest of hesitations.

*I must find out what has come over him this summer. He has never been spontaneously affectionate to me in his life.*

“See you downstairs,” Draco said, breaking off the hug and crossing to the door. “Thanks.”

He was gone. Narcissa sank onto the bed, shaking.

*If anything exists beyond this world, she prayed silently, if anyone is listening in the heavens, watch over my son, keep him safe in a world gone mad, for he is becoming against the odds the*

*man I had hoped he could be, and for that he may be murdered by those of his own party...*

---

The next morning, after a night of sleep without either dreams or spirit-travel, Draco was up early, pacing his room restlessly.

*This is going to be the strangest year ever. In many, many ways.*

After breakfast, Lucius and Narcissa escorted him to King's Cross. Draco shivered as he walked onto platform nine and three-quarters, though the day was not particularly cold.

*It's quiet. It's never quiet here. The only people making noise are the Death Eaters and their kids—everyone else is silent as the tomb...*

He winced. *Possibly bad choice of simile there.*

“Learn well this year,” Lucius said when Draco's trunk was loaded on the train, clapping him on the arm. “Make me proud.”

*In your dreams.* “Yes, sir.” Draco turned to Narcissa. “Goodbye, Mother.”

She clasped his hands in hers, looking into his face hungrily. “Be strong,” she murmured. “Stay safe. I...” Her voice trailed off, as if even here and now she did not dare to voice the thought.

Draco glanced at Lucius, then stepped forward and put his arms around Narcissa again. “You too,” he said, answering what she hadn't been able to say. “I'll see you at Christmas.”

Mentally, he upgraded his birth mother to first cousin status in terms of his feelings towards her. *She actually cares about me. I never knew, unless you count fussing over me as a sign of caring. Which I suppose it is, but it always irked me more than anything else...*

The whistle blew. Draco gently loosened Narcissa's arms around him. “I have to go,” he told her. “You don't want me to get left behind, do you?”

“No. Of course not.” Narcissa smiled up at him. “Not when you are going back where you belong. Goodbye, Draco. Be careful.”

“I will.” Draco leapt into the nearest doorway as the train began to move and hung out of it for a few seconds to wave. Narcissa waved back eagerly, and Lucius inclined his head.

*He's taking public notice of me? Quick, somebody give me a sky-proof umbrella.*

But even if the sky had actually been falling, Draco wouldn't have cared. He'd survived the summer, he was headed back to Hogwarts, and he had a purpose in his life at last.

*Get through the war alive, and be somewhere else when the Dark Lord is killed...*

*Why do I have the feeling it won't be nearly as easy as that?*

Easy or not, though, he was going to do it.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled. He turned to look over his shoulder.

Luna Lovegood stood in the door into one of the cars behind him, regarding him gravely.

“What're you looking at?” Draco snapped, his surprise throwing him into his old habits of speech.

“You.” Luna's eyes never wavered from his face. “There's something different about you this year.”

“Yeah.” Draco shut the outer door of the train and mounted the two steps to the level Luna was standing on. “My side's winning.” He summoned the smirk he'd always used towards Potter and his gang, though it felt forced. “So keep your head down if you know what's good for you.”

“You know I can't do that.” Luna might have been telling him what was going to be served at the feast that night, or what she'd helped her father put in *The Quibbler* over the summer. “None of us can. Not and be able to look at ourselves in a mirror after this is all over. It steals a piece of your soul, when you let evil win. Or help it.”

“I think my soul's just fine, thank you,” Draco drawled. “Why don't you go find Potter and your other little friends? Or didn't they dare come back to school this year?”

“No, Harry's not here. Neither are Ron or Hermione, though I understand Ron's ill.” Luna bowed her head. “It's a shame. He should have been helping us to fight.”

“What's the point in fighting? It's over, Lovegood. We win.” A feeling he couldn't yet identify was surging in Draco, filling his words. “Stay out of the way and you won't get hurt. Even you ought to be able to understand that.”

“I've already told you I can't do that,” Luna said quietly. “No more than you can.”

“Me?” Draco snorted. “I don't have to do a thing. Just sit back and enjoy it. Hogwarts is finally going to be run the way it always should've been.”

“If you say so.” Luna turned to go into the car, humming as she did. The notes caught Draco's ear, and he listened until the door snicked shut behind her.

*Where have I heard that song before?*

It was not until he was sitting down in the compartment where he and Lucius had stowed his trunk that the snatch of melody came to him, its lyrics sung in the same silvery voice he'd just heard humming it a few moments before.

*But the devil's to blame*

*And the angels proclaim...*

*It's a dangerous game*

Draco bolted back upright, nearly bashing his head on the rack above him.

*Luna taught me that song. The other Luna. And now this Luna knows it.*

*It's a coincidence. It has to be.*

*Or...*

He sank back onto the seat.

*Or it could be a warning...*

There might be many words he'd use to describe this year, Draco thought, but “boring” would surely never be one of them.

## Be Careful 27: What You Act Like

Draco arranged himself on the seat and made sure his attitude was firmly in place.

*That business on the Astronomy Tower? Unimportant, over and done with, and no one's business in any case. I may not be a leader now, but neither am I anyone's toady.*

A chuckle started in his chest, and he allowed a sardonic grin to get out. His last bodily visit to the other world had ended with him being roped into reading a number of the smaller ones bedtime stories. *I am the whatever-that-was-the-Manor-showed-me that walks by himself, and all places are alike to me.*

The Manor's library hadn't had a copy of the book which contained that particular story, but another book by the same author had been available. Draco fished it out of his schoolbag now and flipped it open to the place he'd left off.

*“Remember the night is for hunting, and forget not the day is for sleep.” Maybe I'm not going out hunting, but my nights are when I'm going to be living. Days are for getting through. Surviving, by any means necessary.*

The door squeaked. Draco looked up, doing his best to keep the calm confidence on his face even as it slid out of his insides.

*Let's hope those means don't have to include groveling...*

“Mind if we sit here?” asked Theodore Nott, his tone half-serious, half-mocking. Crabbe and Goyle hulked behind him, and shadows moved in the dim light of the corridor beyond.

*He's not sure how to handle this any more than I am. Give him something to work with. Polite, but distant.* “Plenty of room.” Draco swept a hand across the two benches, swinging his feet down from where they'd been perched but retaining a fair swath of the seat for himself in a controlled sprawl. “How was your summer?”

“Enjoyable.” Nott put his owl's cage on the rack above his seat and took the place by the window. “Yours?”

Draco considered how to answer this for a moment, while Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson, Daphne Greengrass, and Millicent Bulstrode joined them in the compartment. “A learning

experience,” he said finally.

Nott snorted. “Learning experience? Are you angling to be a professor now?”

“There are worse things to be.” *I can't think of any off the top of my head, but I'm sure they exist. Especially with the new leadership at Hogwarts.*”

“Yes, I was so happy to hear about that,” Daphne said, tossing back her blond hair. “Finally, a Headmaster who won't stifle us! If our natural inclinations are towards the Darker magics, we should be free to explore those realms, with guidance from those who have gone before!”

Draco intercepted his disbelieving stare and stored it away for later, along with the words which had provoked it.

*Everyone's always nervy the night a show goes up. It'll do us good to laugh—break the tension a bit...*

Somehow, that thought, juxtaposed with the faces and voices of his Housemates of six years as they chatted about their summers and reestablished their pecking order, brought home the bizarre precariousness of his position.

*I'm alone here, more alone than I've ever been. I don't believe what they do anymore, but I can't let anyone know that. And how long can I act the part of the supercilious junior Death Eater before I fall back into it for real? It'd be easy—I've had seventeen years to get it ingrained, and less than two months' practice being anything else...*

He looked down at his book. *I don't know if this is going to work out. Having a foot in two worlds nearly tore Mowgli apart. Eventually he had to go back to the world where he was born.*

*Of course, that meant he had to leave behind the ones who raised him...*

That was the message he was going to take from The Jungle Books, Draco decided. Not that he couldn't make the leap into the other world, but that he had to do so.

*And from that standpoint, it's perfectly fine for me to be thinking as if I've always lived there. But while I'm here, I need to stay...* He smiled to himself. *In character.*

This sounded tricky, but Draco thought he could pull it off. It helped that a great deal about the ‘Draco Malfoy’ that the world had known before this summer had been false to begin with.

*It was a mask then, it'll be a mask now. But there are three important differences.*

*One, now I know it's a mask. I didn't before.*

*Two, now there's something under the mask. Which there didn't used to be.*

*And three, now I have a place and time I can take the mask off.*

The chatter in the compartment was winding down. It sounded as though the other Slytherins had worked out a tentative hierarchy. Draco wasn't sure what place they'd assigned him, but as long as they weren't expecting him to crawl to any of them, he didn't care.

*Disinterested is the way to go, I think. As if this were all beneath me, or behind me already. As if I were sure how it will all end.*

*As if it really were nothing more than a story or a play.*

*Or a dream.*

He turned the page and began to read "Kaa's Hunting".

---

The Sorting Feast was a travesty.

The Sorting Hat, brought out by a grim-faced McGonagall, did not sing, but merely awaited the arrival at the wooden stool of the line of first years before beginning its job in brisk, no-nonsense tones. It finished quickly, as there were fewer first years than Draco could ever remember seeing before.

*Maybe because there aren't any Muggleborns?*

Professor Snape, now officially Headmaster Snape, gave a short speech in which he mentioned how honored he'd been to serve under Headmaster Dumbledore, "misguided though I believed some of his policies to be." When he finished and sat down, the tables filled with food, and the feast began.

*This is creepy.* Draco helped himself to a slice of ham and a spoonful of potatoes. *No one's talking except us.*

Indeed, the Slytherins were making enough noise for at least two Houses, but that didn't disguise that the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs were all eating in wary silence, casting hostile looks towards the boisterous Slytherin table.

*Has anyone noticed it but me?*

None of his Housemates seemed aware of the other Houses' silent enmity, but as Draco turned back to his food, movement at the high table caught his eye. Snape was leaning over to Slughorn, emphasizing whatever he was saying with short and choppy gestures, nodding first towards the Slytherins, then towards the rest of the Great Hall.

*The teachers see it. They'll deal with it. No more need to worry.*

But even the Hogwarts food, as excellent as always, couldn't take the edge of nervousness out of Draco's stomach.

*An awful lot goes on around here that the teachers never hear about...*

---

The feast over, Draco got to his feet. “First years, this way!” he called aloud, waving a hand over his head. “Slytherin first years!”

“Only kind there ought to be,” said one of the boys, shoving his way to the front of the crowd. His dark hair was combed slickly back, and he swaggered as he walked. “I wouldn't give a bucket of werewolf spit for the other three Houses. Put together.”

*What an insufferable little—*

*Wait a second. That used to be me.*

Draco couldn't keep the rueful smile from his face, and decided to put it to good use.

“You think so?” he said, crossing his arms and looking down at the boy, who seemed taken aback that someone was answering him. “I thought so once, when I was your age. But some of them over there are pretty good with their wands. And six out of seven of them know more magic than you do.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of dark blonde hair.

The boy scoffed. “My dad's been teaching me magic since I could walk! I know more than a third year!”

“Which leaves the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh years who could still beat you with one hand tied behind their back,” Draco countered. “All it takes is a trick you don't know, or a spell you're not expecting. Underestimate your enemy, and you're the one who falls. Always assume they're better than they are.” He grinned. “If nothing else, it means you'll prepare to a level where you can crush them instead of just winning.”

The boy's eyes flashed with excitement at this last sentence. “I want to crush Mudbloods,” he said, looking up at Draco worshipfully. “Teach them they're not allowed to pretend to be witches and wizards when I'm around. Will we learn how to do that?”

“Eventually,” Draco temporized. “You have to work on the basics first. But then yes, I think you will learn some crushing.” He turned to head for the doors.

The blonde hair he'd seen resolved itself into Luna, standing very still a few seats away and gazing past him with her face displaying a mixture of curiosity and—

*Is that disappointment?*

Some part of him clamored that he had to run to her, to explain what he was trying to do, to justify himself, but he held back. *That'd be suicide. Maybe not literally, but for the image I'm trying to*

*cultivate, it might as well be. I can't care what she thinks of me, not if I want to make a difference this year and eventually get home for good when the Dark Lord goes down—*

Luna's eyes swung back towards Draco's and met them.

Draco froze, transfixed. Blue-gray was all there was, all there would ever be—he was being weighed, measured, and somehow he sensed that he had not been found entirely wanting—

Luna turned away, and Draco shook himself. “See, that's a Ravenclaw,” he told the boy behind him. “Don't get in an argument with them. They forget more every day than you'll learn in a year. The only way to beat them is to kick them in the shins while they've got their heads up in the clouds.”

A ripple of snickering spread back through the Slytherins, and Draco started walking again, waving at the first years to follow him. “Hufflepuffs, now,” he said over his shoulder. “You have to take them out on the first spell, because if they get a hold of you, they'll never let go. Don't know when they're beaten, and sometimes they'll come back and surprise you long after you thought they were done.”

“And what about Gryffindors?” the boy asked, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. “How do you beat them?”

Draco snorted. “Get lucky. Gryffindors are hard. But if you can outthink them, make them think you're going one way when you're really going another, most of the time you can win.”

“I'll win every duel I have,” the boy bragged. “There won't be anyone who can stand against me!”

*This is already getting old.* Draco unobtrusively slid a hand inside his robes and found his wand's grip. *I hope I didn't grate this badly on the prefects when I was a firstie...*

“Not even any of you will be able to beat me,” the boy went on, looking around at his Housemates. “But I won't beat you too badly. Not as badly as I'll beat—”

Draco spun, wand in hand, and struck a dueler's pose in front of the startled first year, who went cross-eyed trying to see the tip of the wand, an inch from his nose.

“You won't beat anyone if your mouth is making so much noise you can't hear your opponent cast,” he said softly. “Let's get down to the dorms. Tomorrow you'll have classes, and you can let your wandwork do the bragging for you.”

The boy gulped and nodded. His face had gone pasty white, and the bravado in his eyes was gone, replaced by a sick fear.

*He must think I'm actually going to hurt him...*

Draco slid his wand back away and saw some of the fear lift from the boy's brown eyes, but its shadow was still there, and Draco's stomach clenched at what that meant.

*He must have been told the prefects and teachers can do anything they want to him.*

*And I'm not sure he's wrong.*

*“Let's go,” he said, turning back towards the dungeon stairs. “I need some sleep.”*

---

Safe within his bedcurtains, Draco allowed himself a brief moment of shivering.

*First years shouldn't be afraid of their own House's prefects. That's just wrong.*

*Not that anything about this day has been particularly right.*

But he knew the quickest solution to that.

*Live the day over again, the way it ought to have been...*

He'd been pleasantly surprised that Lucius did not insist the Dreamless Sleep Potion go with him to school. Then again, if he happened to wander off in his sleep while he was at Hogwarts, that was no skin off Lucius' nose.

*He might even be able to use it to score points on Snape, if the opportunity arose.*

*Which it won't.*

Draco crawled to the head of the bed, burrowed under the covers, and settled down to sleep. Then, remembering, he parted the curtains just enough to grab his wand and tuck it into his pajama pocket.

*I have clothes and books there, but I don't have an extra wand. Have to be sure to bring it back, though, it'll be hard to get another one...*

A small stab of guilt hit Draco. Despite his new power over the Manor, the only thing he had done to help Ollivander through the entire summer was to open a small air shaft into the cellar where the wandmaker was being held. He'd have fresh air and a bit of sunlight on some days, and the shaft would close itself if anyone else entered the cellar and open again as soon as they left.

*Still, maybe I should have done something else. Like, oh, let him go...*

Sanity reasserted itself. *He's in no shape to travel alone, and I can't exactly go with him. There'll be an opportunity to help him more at some point. I've done what I can for him for now.*

*It's time to do something for me.*

He yawned hugely and shut his eyes.

*Time to go home.*

Draco woke up falling.

His yelp of surprise was cut off short as he impacted with the fluffy green rug which had materialized over the stone floor he was used to.

*Doesn't make it any softer, though.*

And it was not masking the snickering coming from behind him.

“Very funny,” he grunted when he had enough breath to do so. “Thought you'd give me a special wake-up call, huh?”

“Just wanted to remind you why you're glad to be back,” Ray said cheerily.

Draco growled, but his heart wasn't in it. “I know where you sleep,” he said, shoving himself upright.

“I sleep where you sleep. Mostly.”

Draco turned and gave his friend a lazy smile. “There are a world of possibilities in that little word ‘mostly.’”

“Great.” Ray's shoulders sagged. “Remind me not to pick on you anymore.”

“I won't have to. When I'm done with you, you never will.”

*Now I just have to figure out what I'm going to do to him...*

Draco slid the question to the back of his mind for later thought. Right now, he had a day of rehearsing to get through, culminating in the Sorting Feast—*a real one, this time*—and the show.

*Here's hoping I don't fall on my face.*

But even if he did, the worst that would happen would be a few indulgent chuckles and a hand held out to help him up.

He'd made it home. It was time for life to be good.

## **Be Careful**

### **28: Who You Show Off To**

After a quick shower, Draco slid into a clean set of robes (the house-elf network appeared to be functioning properly, as the clothing from his wardrobe at Fidelus Manor was now in the one next to Ray's) and headed out of the dorms with the Beauvois heir, chatting about the day's plans.

"We were right on schedule up until yesterday," Ray said, making a face as they climbed the final flight of stairs to the main floor. "Then Jonathan went and—"

Draco held up a hand, peering forward. "Do you see what I see?" he asked quietly.

Ray followed his line of sight. Luna and Abby were standing in a corner of the entrance hall, looking up at one of the statues and discussing it. "I don't know. What do you see?"

Draco grinned. "I see a first-rate opportunity."

Ray returned the grin and picked up the cue. "To get married with impunity."

"And indulge in the felicity of unbounded domesticity." Draco spread his arms expansively, nearly hitting Ray. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Ray assumed a prayerful pose. "We shall quickly be parsonified."

Draco copied him, clasping his hands and looking up to heaven. "Conjugally matrimonified."

"By a doctor of divinity who is located in this vicinity," Ray finished, half-turning at the sound of footsteps behind them. "Morning, Professor."

"Good morning," Draco echoed as Professor Riddle came up the stairs they'd used.

"Good morning, gentlemen." The Professor stepped between the boys, who squeezed to opposite sides of the doorway, and looked around the entrance hall. "May I assume you're planning a bit of girl-stealing?"

"Who, us?" Ray looked shocked. "We are models of virtue! We would never steal anything, particularly not a girl!"

"Why would you ever think such a thing of us, sir?" Draco finished. He'd begun to get a feel for

the way professors and students bantered in this world, but he knew he was still an amateur compared to Ray or Harry.

“Partly the lyrics you were quoting so adeptly, but mostly the view.” Professor Riddle flicked a glance towards the two girls, who were giggling over something Abby had just said. “I think I shall excuse myself. What I do not see, I cannot be held responsible for.”

Both boys bowed. The Professor nodded back, then turned and went into the Great Hall, from which appetizing smells were wafting.

*I could deal with breakfast. But in a minute.*

Draco slid carefully out of the doorway and began to cross the hall on tiptoe. Ray moved quickly to flank him, setting his feet down with great caution. Luna and Abby remained blissfully unaware, Luna now pointing out some detail on the statue's shoes to Abby. They were twenty feet away—ten feet—five—

Ray lifted a hand, then slashed it down, and he and Draco pounced at the same moment. “Ha-ha!” they shouted together, snatching the girls off their feet.

Abby's wordless shriek turned into a gleeful “Draco! You're here!”

“Where else would I be?” Draco asked, slinging Abby over his shoulder. “You've got your lines wrong, though. It's ‘Too late!’”

“That's for tonight,” Abby said into the back of Draco's robes, squirming until her weight was evenly adjusted. “Right now I'm happy to see you!”

“I never would have guessed,” Draco said dryly. “And you two need to get a room,” he added to Ray and Luna, who had taken advantage of the moment.

“No thanks,” Ray said, breaking off the clinch. “We're done. Breakfast time for pirates and daughters.”

“I didn't think you were a pirate anymore,” Luna remarked as Ray carried her away towards the Great Hall.

“I'm getting in touch with my roots.”

Abby laughed so hard at this that Draco had to put her down before he dropped her.

“So, Mistress Kate,” he said, taking her hand instead. “Are you ready for tonight?”

Abby nodded. “What about you?” she said. “It worked perfectly yesterday—Aunt Letha's furious about it...”

“I think I can handle it.”

Unseen, Draco crossed the fingers of his free hand. He knew he'd mastered the music of the part in *Pirates* that he wanted, and he thought he had the dance steps down well enough, but he'd never performed it for an audience, only alone in his bedroom, or in his invisible spirit form behind the other boys on the rehearsal stage.

*Am I going to freeze up when I have to do this in front of people?*

“Hold, monsters!” Luna's clear voice rang out from the door to the Great Hall.

“Come on!” Abby whispered, holding out her arms to Draco. “Steal me!”

Draco bundled her over his shoulder again as Luna continued her recitative, chanting her words on a long-held note. “Ere your pirate caravanserai proceed, against our will, to wed us all, just bear in mind that we are wards in chancery, and Father is a Major-General!”

*Hey, that's my cue!* Draco peered around the door as though he were afraid of something. “We'd better pause, or danger may befall,” he chanted in his turn, addressing the group of students sitting at the nearest table. “Their father is a Major-General!”

Several of the girls in the group stood up, and Abby wiggled until Draco set her down, though he kept an arm around her. “Yes, yes, he is a Major-General!” they echoed worshipfully.

“Yes, yes!” Neville stepped up onto the bench and struck a martial pose. “I am a Major-General!”

Draco swept his arm towards Neville. “For he is a Major-General!” he sang. Harry sat upright, looking offended—the melody Draco'd just used was the same as that of the *Pirate King's* song near the beginning of the show.

“He is!” the rest of the students chimed in. “Hurrah for the Major-General!”

Neville drew himself up with pride. “And it is, it is a glorious thing to be a Major-General!”

The other actors applauded him or gazed at him adoringly as they sang. “It is! Hurrah for the Major-General, hurrah for the Major-General!”

“You stole my song!” Harry said accusingly over the cheers, pointing at Neville.

“No, no.” Neville climbed down off the bench. “I requisitioned your song. In accordance with proper Army regulations.”

Snickers ran around the table.

“Everyone, look who's here!” Abby said, bouncing to a place beside Meghan.

“Hey, Malfoy,” Harry said, waving at Draco.

“Morning, Malfoy,” rang out in other voices. “Good to see you.” “Glad you made it.” “Have a seat.”

“Porridge?” Ron offered from his seat beside Hermione, who was across the table from Meghan.

“Thanks.” Draco sat down beside Abby and accepted the large tureen. “So how are things here?”

“Well, we were thinking we'd have to put off the show,” Harry said, flicking a finger at a sausage link, which fell into two pieces with a slight smell of smoke. “You remember Jonathan was going to play Samuel?”

“The pirate lieutenant. Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, yesterday, for some reason known only to God and himself, he decided he wanted to experiment with Timed Silencing Charms.” Harry's voice dripped disdain. “And he managed to lock up his vocal cords for the next seventy-two hours. Which means we'd be short a part if we tried opening tonight, and we didn't bother with understudies because it's just a pick-up show.”

Draco made a noncommittal noise, which he hoped the rest of the group would attribute to his mouth being full of porridge. In fact, despite not being either God or Jonathan Beauvoi, he knew precisely the reason why the younger boy had laid that particular charm on himself.

*Because he can't resist Abby's big pleading eyes any more than I can.*

“But it sounds as if you know the part pretty well,” Hermione took over. “You had that bit we were doing spot-on. Have you been coming to the rehearsals?”

Draco nodded and swallowed. “Every chance I get,” he said. “You don't understand how new it is for me. We don't do this kind of thing where I'm from. It's not just that it's rare—we wouldn't think of it, it would never cross our minds. If we were stuck at Hogwarts for a summer, we'd probably... I don't know, start a prank war against the other Houses.”

The snickering reemerged, louder this time. “We do that too,” Ray said, wiggling his eyebrows at Ron, who made an obscene gesture back at him. “But shows don't require us to watch our backs every second of the day.”

“No, they don't. Tipping me out of bed to wake me up, however...”

“Ray!” Hermione snapped. “That wasn't nice!”

“It's no business of yours whether I'm nice or not,” Ray said defensively.

“It is when you're probably going to come to me to fix whatever he does back to you!”

“Note to self,” Draco muttered loudly enough that the rest of the table could hear him, pretending to write on the back of his hand. “Use a charm Hermione doesn't know.”

“Is there such a thing?” Ginny asked.

“I’ll find one.”

“Who says I’d come to you, *Mrs. Weasley*?” Ray stuck out his tongue at his sister, who reddened. “Why did you do that, anyway? You’re still in dorms for this whole year, students don’t get married quarters unless there’s some magical need for it—why the rush?”

“This is how you can tell someone whose father works at Hogwarts from someone whose father works at the Ministry,” Ron said to the table at large.

“Go on, rub it in how you hear everything months ahead of time,” Ray grumbled. “What is it this time?”

“They’re talking about a marriage law again.”

The table groaned. “That was defeated years ago!” Meghan protested. “Just after the Troubles, when we were all little!”

“Yes, but this time it looks like it might pass.” Ron looked unusually serious. “They’re keeping it quiet until they’re sure they have enough support. It’s slow going, but with attacks on the rise like they have been...”

“What’s this about?” Draco asked Abby quietly.

“Well, dementors tend to fall into two groups.” Abby portioned off her beans to illustrate. “One group likes to try to attack wizards, because our magic makes our souls and our feelings taste better, and they grow stronger feeding from us. The others go after Muggles, because they know Muggles can’t see them and can’t defend against them properly. We ward cities and towns strongly enough to keep that kind away, but sometimes the ones who like us will go and attack those wards, and that can make them fail. Every wizarding family has a responsibility to the wards of the place where they live, and the ones like us who have manors have a responsibility for all the land and people around them, but we can’t always get there in time...”

“And some Muggles end up Kissed, or mad from overexposure.” Draco shuddered. He’d rarely been close to dementors—once or twice during his third year at Hogwarts, a few times since the Dark creatures had changed their allegiance before his sixth, and his two adventures here in the other world—but he never wanted to repeat the experience.

*And I can fight back. I have a wand, I know the charm, I’ve even managed to do it properly. What would it be like to be stalked by this clinging darkness I couldn’t see or fight?*

Abby nodded gravely. “There’ve always been people who said we should make the two kinds turn into one,” she said. “By making the two kinds of people into one.”

“Not following,” Draco said after a moment to try to decipher this.

“They want to make everyone magical,” Abby clarified. “Stop there from being any more Muggles, because they think Muggles are a drain on our society and shouldn't exist.”

Draco nearly snorted porridge up his nose. “Some things never change, I guess,” he said when he was sure he could breathe again.

“What?”

“Never mind. So how exactly are these brilliant minds going to stop there from being any more Muggles?”

“Do what Ron said. Pass a marriage law. Make it illegal for a wizard or a witch to marry anybody but a Muggle.”

Draco stared at Abby. “Please say you're joking.”

“She's not,” said Meghan from beyond Abby, her face entirely straight. “The idea's been around for years—a radical party came to power in Germany in the 1930's and tried it out in practice, though their ideas were a little stricter.”

“How did that go?”

“Started the worst magical war in history,” Harry said bluntly.

“Ouch.”

“Not only that, but the war made it impossible for us to stay secret any longer,” Hermione added. “There were simply too many people who'd seen too much. We keep to ourselves out of habit here, but everyone in a village or a neighborhood will know which family living there is magical.”

“For their own survival's sake, if nothing else,” Ginny put in. “Even the ones who ‘shall not suffer a witch to live’ change their tune once they've seen what's left after the Dementor's Kiss.”

“And it works?” Draco asked, thinking of the fragile and much-mended curtain of secrecy which shrouded magic in his own world.

“It was rough at first,” said Ray. “There were mobs, protests, some bricks got thrown. But once they worked out that we could protect ourselves without hurting them, that protesting our existence wasn't going to make us go away, and that we could help with a lot of problems that didn't seem to have answers, suddenly we weren't evil anymore.”

“Sounds nice.” Draco speared a piece of bacon with his fork.

“So it does,” said a woman's voice from one of the side doors of the Great Hall, and Meghan's mother—Professor Black, Draco recalled he should be calling her now, she taught elementary Potions—strode over to the table.

“Mum!” Meghan jumped up to hug the woman. “How long were you there?”

“Long enough to hear something else ‘nice.’” Professor Black returned her daughter's embrace, then looked at Draco. “Malfoy, when you're finished with breakfast, my office, please?”

## Be Careful 29: What You Scheme For

Draco stopped outside Professor Black's door, caught his breath, and knocked.

“Come in!” the brisk, clear voice called.

Draco let himself in and shut the door behind him. “You wanted to see me, Professor?”

“Yes, Malfoy. Have a seat.” Professor Black waved to one of the chairs in front of her desk.

Draco glanced around the office as he sat down. It was decorated with posters from what he suspected were famous musical shows, some of them signed, and with photographs of the Black family. An upright piano stood against one wall, and the window was open to the crisp September breeze.

“I'm neither stupid nor senile, Malfoy,” said Professor Black coolly, drawing Draco's eyes back to her. “Nor am I so far removed from my Hogwarts days that I can't tell when I'm being manipulated. You and Abigail between you convinced Jonathan to ‘play’ with that Silencing Charm, didn't you?”

For a split second, Draco considered lying.

*Don't be stupid. She's into theatre, she'll spot you in a heartbeat. Besides, they don't look too kindly on lies around here. Tell the truth and you might impress her.*

“Yes, Professor.”

Professor Black's eyebrows flickered, as though she were both surprised and amused by his answer. “Given your display a few minutes ago, I assume this was to open the role for yourself?”

Draco nodded.

Professor Black leaned forward. “If you had not shown some level of skill in that display, we would not even be having this conversation,” she informed him. “This show may have been your friends' idea, but all theatre at this school falls under my jurisdiction, and I take interference in my bailiwick very seriously indeed. I may not have you in class—it depends on how you do in your placement tests—”

“Placement tests?” Draco couldn't help asking.

“Yes, placement tests. New students, like you, take placement tests to ensure they are enrolled in classes which will challenge them without overwhelming them. Did you pass your Potions O.W.L.?”

“With an E,” Draco said with a bit of pride.

“Then we won't be meeting in a professional capacity. Nonetheless, I have the right to give detentions to any student in this castle if they merit it. You have precisely one chance to convince me that you don't.” Professor Black pointed to the door. “The wardrobe department is next door to the kitchens, behind the painting of the sewing room. The pincushion is the doorknob. Get yourself into pirate costume and be backstage in fifteen minutes. We will perform a full dress rehearsal, and if you sing one note wrong or put one foot out of place, you will be serving a month of detentions with me.”

Draco shot to his feet. “A month?”

“I can make it two if you'd prefer.”

Draco was just opening his mouth to tell her exactly what he thought of her sense of fairness and proportion when he recognized the look on Professor Black's face. Equal parts amusement and challenge, it was the same one Meghan had worn as she watched Neville fumble through the Major-General's song at the earliest rehearsals.

*She's—she's testing me! She thinks, no, she knows I can do this, and she's testing to see if I'm serious about it!*

Instead of the tirade he'd been about to unleash, he bestowed his sweetest smile on Professor Black. “Two months sounds fine, Professor. If I don't do a good job, that is.”

“Off with you, then.” Professor Black flicked her fingers at him. “Shoo shoo.”

Draco shooed, and managed to get most of the way to the sewing room before the fit of guffaws overcame him. Ray and Harry found him leaning on a wall in the entrance hall, still chuckling weakly.

“I'll be fine,” he assured them, standing up. “As long as I get this right.”

“We'll cover for you if you don't,” Ray said, heading through the door to the hallway they needed. “We've done it before. Would you believe, back when we did Phantom...”

Stories about the mishaps and slip-ups which had plagued Hogwarts shows in the past occupied the time the house-elves needed to fit Draco with a costume (Harry and Ray took turns dressing in their own costumes and coming up with new anecdotes) and continued as the three jogged down the lawn towards the outdoor stage by the lake, where the show would take place.

Ginny, her flowered skirt held up to her knees, overtook them on the way. “Neville!” she called, waving a sheet of parchment over her head. “They're done!”

“Great!” Neville accepted the parchment from Ginny and skimmed the lines written on it. “Nice... nice... oh, very nice. She'll love that. Right, right—oy!”

“What? The Potions line?” Ginny smiled innocently. “It's true.”

“That doesn't mean you had to put it in,” Neville grumbled, returning to his reading. A moment later, he burst out laughing. “I will, too!” he got out between fits. “If they do, I will!”

“What am I missing?” Draco asked.

“It's traditional to add a little something special to every show,” Harry said, polishing the ruby-studded hilt of his sword with his tattered sleeve. “Ginny wrote Neville a new verse for his song. It's all about him.”

“About the Major-General, or about Neville Longbottom?”

“Yes,” said Ray.

“You're so helpful.”

Neville groaned aloud. “I should have known,” he said, shaking his head. “I should have known you'd get one of their jokes in here.”

Ginny struck an angelic pose.

“Come here, wench,” Harry growled, scooping her off her feet. “How'd you like to be a Pirate Queen?”

“That sounds like fun. Where do I join?”

“Let's see it,” Ray said to Neville as Harry and Ginny disappeared around the corner of the stage.

“Who said you could read it?”

“If we don't and it's that funny, we'll fall apart when you do it on stage.”

“And I've got a lot riding on this,” Draco added. “Two months of detentions from Professor Black. I think she was joking, but I'd rather not risk it.”

“Good point. You never can tell, with her.” Neville handed Ray the parchment. “I need that back when you're done, so I can get it memorized in time.”

“Right.” Ray flicked his eyes rapidly back and forth along the lines, snickering every so often, then passed the parchment to Draco. “Knock yourself out.”

Draco began to read the twelve lines, written freehand across the parchment in Ginny's looping script. By the end of the fourth line, he was chuckling, and the sixth made him snort.

*Some things never change.*

The eighth line made him laugh aloud; the tenth puzzled him a bit, but he decided there must be an inside joke he hadn't heard about yet.

*There usually is, around here. I'll catch up eventually.*

“Looks like fun,” he said, giving Neville back the parchment. “So, where do I enter the first time?”

“Stage left,” Ray said, swinging himself up onto the back of the stage without bothering to use the stairs. “That's during the overture. You're fighting with Frederic—that's me—”

“Right.”

“No, left.”

“Shut up.”

They'd run through an abbreviated version of Samuel's blocking, the movements he was required to make on the stage, to the end of the first act by the time Professor Black appeared in front of the stage. “Five minutes,” she called clearly, her voice echoing through the stage and the wings to either side. “The call is five minutes!”

“Five minutes, thank you!” Draco called back with Ray and the rest of the actors nearby, blessing the curiosity that had led him backstage in his spirit form on a number of occasions.

*I may actually pull this off—and wouldn't that be a change for the better? Succeeding in one of my ambitious and insane plans, rather than failing?*

Besides, even if he failed at this, the worst he'd get would be detentions, not the public humiliation of getting hexed into oblivion by a compartment full of his peers.

*No, just the public humiliation of screwing up a show they obviously all care about.*

However, there was a simple solution to his problems.

*Don't screw up in the first place.*

*I shouldn't in any case. I know the music, I know the part, and they'll cover for me if I step a little out of line.* Draco smiled in the direction of Abby, who was giggling with three or four of the other daughters, her wreath of blue flowers askew on her head. *That's what so nice about doing this with friends.*

*Besides, just remember what Professor Black's been telling them—us—all along—*

“One final reminder,” Professor Black shouted from the front row of seats, over the sound of the orchestra tuning up. “The easiest way to look stupid on stage is to—”

“Hold back!” the cast bellowed in return.

*Which sounds backwards, but it's true.*

It had been easy, even for Draco's inexperienced eyes, to pick out the veteran actors among the cast. They spoke and sang out boldly, moved with their entire bodies, owned the moments when it was their turn to shine. The students who had been in fewer shows, or none at all before this, had to be coaxed out of their shells, pushed and harried into giving it their all.

*And they were the ones who stood out, the ones who looked bad. They were trying to play it safe, and you can't do that on stage. You have to go all out, or nothing.*

Draco grinned. *I think I've been waiting my entire life for this.*

He jumped down from the rocks where he'd been sitting and went to find Ray. They had a whole act still to cover.

---

Cecilia Black hurried through the gates of Hogwarts, her heart speeding with more than just the exertion of her half-run.

*He is here. My Draco is here. I will see him, hold him, hear his voice again in just a few minutes.*

“Black, Cecilia,” she said to the girl at the wooden ticket booth sitting beside the gate.

“One moment, Healer.” The girl flicked through her box of tickets, then pulled out a small envelope. “Here you are. Seats D-7 and D-8. Enjoy the show.”

“Thank you.” Cecy made her way to the stage area, smiling as she passed the brightly colored tent which served the performers for dressing and preparation.

*We must have tradition. Even when it is not a room, it is green.*

She rounded the corner of the stage and glanced over the audience. Most of the students seemed to have taken up their peers' invitation for a night of entertainment, and a great many parents were also in attendance—

“Cecy!” Danger called from a seat near the front, waving. “Over here!”

Remus stood up to allow Cecy to pass, pressing her hand as she did. “A busy summer,” he said, sitting down again in seat D-5. “Here's hoping the fall will be a bit more relaxing.”

“Indeed.” Cecy embraced Danger briefly before taking her own seat. “Have either of you seen Draco? Do you know if he is here yet?”

Remus sighed. “I'm sorry, Cecy,” he said gently. “He couldn't stay to watch the show. He sent his love, though.”

Cecy nodded, biting back her disappointment. *He has two lives, not just one, and they both depend on his survival in the more dangerous of them. If he had to return to keep himself safe, I will not begrudge him that.*

She noticed Danger's eyes flash blue, and wondered idly what her friends were discussing in their silent fashion.

---

**That was cruel of you.**

**It's perfectly truthful. And he did ask if it could be a surprise for her.**

**I know. It's just... oh, never mind. If she can forgive him, and you, then I have no right to judge.**

The Beauvois settled back into their seats to await the opening strains of the overture.

---

“She's here,” Abby whispered, peering out through the crack in the curtains. “She's here, Draco, she's here!”

“Way to make me less nervous, brat.” Draco flicked Abby's wreath out of position again. “Get out of here, make room for the pirates.”

Abby hugged him before she skipped away.

“Don't be nervous,” Hermione said, straightening her patched skirt. “You'll do fine. You did great at the dress rehearsal this morning.”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say. Bad dress rehearsal, good performance. So wouldn't that mean—”

“No.”

“But if it's—”

“No.”

“Would you just let me—”

“No.”

“Give it up, mate,” Ray advised, tucking in a loose end of his sash. “I never win with her, so I don't think you'll have much luck.”

“Never win on the other side, either,” Draco muttered, but the words didn't have nearly the force they should have. Sheer, unthinking terror tended to do that.

*Gods of theatre, if you're listening, please don't let me screw this up!*

---

At last, the lights went down over the improvised stage area, and the small orchestra began to play the lively music of the overture. As it swelled into a louder theme, the pirates made their first appearance, swords clashing and shouts of “Ha!” and “Take that!” echoing about the stage. Cecy smiled as Ray backed into view, parrying the fierce thrusts and slashes of—

She sat up in shock as the face under the green bandanna became visible.

“Ha-ha!” shouted Draco, disarming Ray and snatching his sword. He swaggered towards the audience, holding up both swords in triumph, then whooped in surprise and leapt into the air as Ray planted a boot in his bottom. “Arrgh!” he growled at the pirate apprentice, who yelped and ran for his life, Draco chasing him with both swords flailing.

Cecy turned her head to look at Remus. He met her gaze serenely, but as she continued to hold his eyes, a trace of nervousness began to creep into them.

*As well it should.* Cecy gave him a sweet smile and turned back to watch the action on the stage, where Hermione was now dumping a full teapot over Harry's head. *My revenge may not be swift, but it is very, very thorough.*

But revenge would come later. For now, she simply needed to enjoy this wonderful treat of a show.

*And think of how loudly I shall cheer when my son takes his bow.*

---

The show made its way through the torturous twists and turns of its so-called plot, coming at last to the Major-General's song. Neville deftly wove through the verses the audience was expecting, then held up his hands for silence as the orchestra played the little vamps that marked time.

*Am I making it up, or are they going faster than they did?* Draco surreptitiously patted out the beat on the rock behind him with the arm that wasn't holding Abby prisoner. *Not making it up. They've been going a little faster every verse.*

Neville coughed once or twice and launched into the words Ginny had written for him.

“I know my Magic History, I'm gifted in Herbology,

“(The sort of thing a Muggle would most likely call biology),

“I understand Transfiguration theory, making bread of mouse,

“Though when I try, I drive insane the Gryffindors' dear Head of House...”

The audience laughed, none louder than Professor McGonagall herself. Neville bowed to her, then continued.

“In Charms I can excel by bending all the rules of time and space,

“In Potions I'm a huge disaster looking for a happ'ning place...”

All eyes swiveled to Professor Snape, who had taken a seat far off to one side. He looked up at the stage and lifted one eyebrow, his all-purpose gesture for *Yes, and?*

Neville shrugged and returned to his patter.

“A rune I'll read that's barely seen, a dagger or a cup this long...”

He measured with his fingers, then leaned down to glare at the musicians.

“And hex the crazy orchestra who keep on speeding up this song!”

The audience howled, half-obscuring the chorus's repetition of the line and only calming down when Neville began to sing alone again.

“For our audience is patient, but their patience now is gone with it,

“And they are likely thinking that it's time that we ‘GET ON WITH IT!’”

The last four words were shrieked in a high-pitched tone, and drew the biggest laugh yet.

*Definitely some inside joke I don't get.* Draco made a mental note to ask Ray later.

Neville waited out the laughter, then finished the song at top speed.

“But still, in matters vegetable, animal, and mineral,

“I am the very model of a modern Major-General!”

The rest of the cast echoed him, getting their tongues tangled up with the words, but as the audience was already applauding and cheering, it didn't matter.

*And I'm up...*

Draco came forward, Abby twisting in his grasp, as Neville demanded to know what was going on. “Permit me, I’ll explain in two words,” he said, holding up two fingers. “We propose...” He paused, frowning, and looked at his fingers, then brightened and held them up higher. “To marry...” Another frown, and then another idea struck him—he held the fingers pointing down. “Your daughters.”

The audience's laughter sent a thrill straight through Draco.

*It's official. I love this.*

---

The pirates had been redeemed, the final song was finished, the cast was taking their bows. Draco walked forward with Abby and Meghan, who had played the other daughter with singing lines, and bowed from his place between them to the cheers and applause of the audience.

*Are they—*

He glanced out as he straightened.

*Yes, they are.*

The people in the rows of seats in front of him had begun to stand up.

*I guess they really liked it.*

Then he spotted blonde hair and a slim figure four rows back, and the rest of the crowd disappeared. Harry and Hermione, Ray and Luna, took their bows, the entire cast bowed together, but the moments blurred together for Draco. Nothing mattered until the music stopped and he was free to follow the other pirates off the front of the stage, free to run into the audience as they were doing, free to weave between seats and dodge those who wanted to congratulate him. He had his objective firmly in mind.

*Mum.*

He jumped over one last seat, and she was there, hugging him tight and laughing. “You did so well,” she said, kissing the top of his head. “So well, for your first time!”

“I didn't want to disappoint you,” Draco said, freeing an arm for a second to hitch his sword out of the way.

“You have never disappointed me.” Mum smiled at him, pulling back just enough to let him see her face. “I am proud of you. Well done.”

“Thanks.” Draco grinned back at her. “It was fun.”

*And I don't think I'll ever have trouble casting a Patronus again.*

*Bring on the year. I'm ready for anything.*

## Be Careful 30: What You Contrast

Bits of Pirates kept popping into Draco's head the next morning, so that he found himself humming "Here's a first-rate opportunity" as Professor Slughorn handed him his timetable for the year. The rotund Head of House gave him a startled look, which Draco returned blandly.

*So I travel to other worlds and perform operetta in my sleep. What's it to you?*

Slughorn moved on down the table, and Draco ran a finger down the day's column of classes. "Muggle Studies?" he said in surprise. "That's mandatory now?"

"I heard we get to learn what they're really like," said Nott, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Not that pap Dumblesnore was always trying to feed us about how they're just as good as we are."

"And look at Wednesday," Blaise added from one place down. "Doesn't that look fine on a Hogwarts course list, finally?"

Draco looked, and shivered involuntarily. "Gives me goose pimples just thinking about it," he said, summoning a broad smile to hide the real meaning behind his words.

*They're not pretending anymore. It's not Defense Against the Dark Arts. It is Dark Arts.*

Curious, Draco rummaged in his schoolbag and came up with the Daily Prophet from the day before.

*Sure enough. They called Carrow the DADA Professor in here. Wonder why?*

Alecto Carrow's laugh cut through the chatter in the Hall. Draco winced. *Not going to be fun being shut up with those two for a year—*

The words tipped his brain in the right direction. *That's it. That's why they said he'd be teaching Defense. So the parents would think it was just another year, and send their kids off like always.*

*But now we're here, and stone walls and strong wards work two ways.*

*They can keep people out.*

*Or they can keep them in.*

Draco looked up at the enchanted ceiling, a gloomy and lowering gray, and couldn't suppress another shiver.

*We're not just students now. We're hostages.*

*And I do mean we. The Dark Lord gets displeased with a Death Eater, there'll be nothing stopping him from ordering their kid tortured—as I ought to know! He snorted in bitter amusement. Though to be fair, I was the one who failed, Lucius just got to watch it...*

*No more. Not for me, not for anyone.* Draco looked across the Hall, scanning along the Gryffindor table until he located Neville Longbottom. The round-faced boy was glancing about warily between bites, and murmuring to Ginny Weasley, who sat beside him with a face that could have been carved from stone.

*Potter's fooling himself if he thinks they won't go after her. Though she is a Weasley, so she'll probably do plenty to merit it on her own.* Draco grimaced at the thought of bat-winged bogies attacking him. *She's got the talent for certain.*

*And then there's the third of their merry band...*

Luna Lovegood sat near the end of the Ravenclaw table, unconcernedly pouring syrup over her eggs. As Draco watched, she lifted her head. Their eyes met once again.

*How is she—*

The thought vanished as one eyelid flickered over the blue-gray orb below. Cheek muscles quirked, in something so fleeting it could barely be called a smile, and Luna returned to her breakfast, dabbing a finger in the syrup and painting something on the table with it before she took her first bite.

Draco sat back on the bench, blinking.

*She just—does she—*

*No. I'm making it up. She's mad, everyone knows she's mad, just because her counterpart is a little saner than I thought doesn't mean she is. She's just trying to get in good with our side, keep herself alive, that's all. She can't know anything.*

But halfway out of the Hall, Draco absently began to whistle to himself.

*Here's a first-rate opportunity  
To get married with impunity...*

---

“So,” said Alecto Carrow, grinning crookedly at her class of seventh years. “Who can tell me something about Muggles?”

Hands shot up all over the room. Alecto pointed at Neville—

*No. Get your mind straight, Draco. He's Longbottom here. If you think about him by given name, sooner or later you'll call him by it, and you can't afford that. Have to find some way to keep them separate...*

“They're as human as wizards,” Longbottom said in a carrying voice. “And we've all got Muggle blood, we have to, there aren't enough wizards to just marry each other—you've probably got at least half yourself—”

Alecto hissed, and her wand slashed out. Longbottom yelped as a long, bleeding cut appeared on his face.

*That might help. The Neville I'm friends with isn't going to have a great whacking scar across his cheek, and this one will.*

Draco hoped no one had noticed him flinch, but since most of the class had done the same, his chances were fairly good.

“I'm sorry, Professor,” Longbottom said, sitting up straighter. “Is it three-quarters instead?”

Draco dodged a splatter of blood as the cut deepened.

*He belongs in Gryffindor after all. Who'd have thought?*

“Let's try someone else,” Alecto wheezed, pointing at Nott.

“They breed like animals,” Nott said, his eyes gleaming. “Go around doing anyone they want, in public even.”

“Good. Bulstrode?”

“They've got less brains than a cat!”

“Very good. Smith?”

Draco propped his chin on his hands and looked bored. Six years of schooling had given him plenty of practice in the pose.

*Sit here, listen to them tell each other stupid stories, spit back the stories on the test paper, got it. Just like History of Magic, only less interesting.*

*I never thought anything could be, but this qualifies...*

“Malfoy, how about you?” Alecto paused in front of his desk, twiddling her wand idly between two fingers. “What do you know about Muggles?”

Draco glanced sideways at Longbottom, who was blotting at his cheek with a handkerchief, then back to the squat woman standing before him. “As little as possible,” he said.

The Slytherins, and a few of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, snickered. The rest of the students were silent.

*Perfect. They heard what they expected to hear, and they didn't listen any harder than that.*

Draco cinched his ‘arrogant Slytherin’ mask down a little tighter and allowed himself one moment of mental whining underneath it.

*Muuuum, I wanna go hooome...*

*Not yet, dear, his mum's voice soothed in his imagination. You have to finish your day at school. How else are you ever going to get a good education?*

“Wrong!” Alecto slashed another Cutting Curse across the forehead of Seamus Finnegan. “Maybe your ‘dear old dad’ can act like a wizard, maybe he's learned a few tricks here and there, but he's still no more than an animal, and if I ever meet your mum I'll soon set her straight for marrying filth like that!”

Draco scowled inwardly. *I'm getting an education here, all right.*

*I just don't think it's the one they intended me to get.*

---

*Longest. Day. Ever.*

Draco collapsed across his bed thankfully. *Not too much homework, which is good, since I'm going to sleep early tonight, I need some extra to get me through tomorrow—or should I say my second today?*

He toed off his shoes, making a mental list of everything he'd be doing when he got home.

*Placement tests all morning, then in the afternoon I start classes—they said I'd need to start at the beginner level in something called Comparative Cultures, since we don't have it here, and one of its classes meets then—Danger said it's the one Abby'll be in if she doesn't test out, that ought to be fun...*

Classes at the other Hogwarts were set up very differently from the rigid year-based structure Draco was used to. An average student would enter school in his first year and go into all beginner classes, which would be mostly populated with first and second years, though a third year or two might pop in for a few weeks if they needed some extra help with a subject. Third through fifth year was generally covered by intermediate classes, and sixth and seventh year by advanced.

*Sounds normal, but then it starts getting complicated.*

The specific material covered in the classes rotated by year. For instance, in a beginner History of Magic class, the professor would cover the time before Hogwarts had been founded in one year and the time after in the next. An intermediate Defense class would study Dark creatures one year, curses and Dark wizards the next, and the theory of Dark and Light magic the third. Whichever year you entered the class in, by the time you left, you'd have covered everything.

*And if you're a swot like Hermione, you can study on your own and pass the exit exam for certain classes early, and get moved up a level a year ahead of time, or even two.*

Any student who did this, and therefore finished the material of the advanced class in a certain subject before their seventh year, had to do an independent project in that subject under one of the teachers in the department. If it was judged good enough by a board of examiners, the same people who administered O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, it qualified you for instant N.E.W.T. credit in the subject.

*Not anything I'd be interested in, but not anything I'll have the chance to do, either. Let me see—I'll likely be placed in advanced Potions and Charms, intermediate Transfiguration, Defense could go either way, and the rest I honestly have no idea. Have to wait and see...*

Sliding off the bed, Draco went to collect his pajamas. It was impolite to make someone wait.

Even when that 'someone' was yourself.

---

Once again, Draco found himself in the Great Hall having breakfast on the morning of 2 September, but this time it was Professor Snape handing out the timetables, and when Draco began to hum a bit from *Pirates*, other voices joined in, until most of the Hall was roaring the pirates' very loud song about how very quiet they were being.

*Shouldn't I be embarrassed by this?* Draco wondered, swallowing a bite of bacon in time to join the third repetition. *It's not exactly dignified.*

*Of course, neither is cheering on a Quidditch side, and I've done that plenty of times.*

*I suppose it's all down to what's expected and what's allowed. Around here, it really seems like anything goes, as long as you do it well. There's less emphasis on looking good and more on being good.*

He took a bite of toast. *We could do with a bit of that back where I'll be tomorrow...*

It was always possible that someday the people of his original world would learn that attitude, Draco thought.

*Yeah. And it's also possible that fire crabs will fly out of the Dark Lord's bum.*

The image caused a small shower of toast crumbs across his portion of the table.

*Have to remember that one to share on morning break...*

---

Morning break, however, was preempted for Draco, as his mum turned up midway through his History of Magic exam (he hadn't been doing well anyway, and finished the last ten questions at breakneck speed with random answers when he spotted her standing in the doorway).

“I realized I had neglected to give you your belated birthday gift last night,” she said when the necessary rituals of greeting were finished. “Here, put it on.”

Draco slid the fine gold chain over his head and examined the small medallion hanging from it. “Thank you. What is it?”

“It is one of the more subtle traps we lay for our children,” Mum said, chuckling. “As well as a safety device. When you place your fingers on either side of one of these gems,” she tapped at the three green jewels embedded in the medallion, protruding slightly on either side, “and pronounce a spell I will teach you, you will be immediately transfigured into your Animagus form, whatever that may be. A nonverbal spell will reverse the transfiguration, restoring you to humanity.”

“Wow.” Experimentally, Draco placed his fingers around one of the gems. Nothing happened, of course, but his mind supplied the experience of having the world explode into enormity around him, four legs replacing two, fur and a tail and a long pointed nose coming into existence with startling suddenness. “Why only three times?”

“Any more would damage your ability to become an Animagus yourself. I assume you will be interested in that.”

“Oh, if I must,” Draco drawled, grinning as Mum laughed. “Not right away, I'm going to be busy with all my new classes, but I do think I'd like to learn it. How do I get started?”

“Professor McGonagall teaches an elective course on the Animagus transformation Saturday afternoons. All you will need to do is demonstrate a basic knowledge of Transfiguration for her, and she will find you a slot.”

*There are worse things to do with a Saturday.* “Thanks, Mum.”

“You are quite welcome.” She hugged him again briefly. “Now, the two spells you will need to know to activate your amulet are these...”

---

Draco shared his image involving the Dark Lord and fire crabs at lunch, causing several showers of various crumbs and liquids. It still gave him a shiver to look across the table and see Harry Potter's eyes in a female face topped with long red hair, but even Lyssa was gradually becoming a familiar sight now.

*I really, really wish I could tell Potter about that...*

As he finished his meal, Draco noticed two students slipping through a small door behind the high table. One of them marked the protective sign on his forehead as he entered, and the other stopped in the doorway and bowed before she went through.

“What's in there?” he asked Ray.

“Oh, people go in there sometimes to be alone. It's nothing important.” Ray checked his watch. “Say, don't you have Comparative Cultures up on the sixth floor? In about five minutes?”

Draco swore and left the Great Hall at a run.

“Come find me on afternoon break!” Ray shouted after him. “I've got something I want to show you!”

---

*I knew I'd be the tallest person in this class except the professor.*

*I didn't know I'd be the tallest including the professor.*

“Good afternoon, class,” said Danger to the roomful of first and second years.

“Good afternoon, Professor Beauvoi,” the students chorused back.

*I guess when it wasn't safe to go home anymore, she decided she might as well stay busy...*

“Who can tell me what Comparative Cultures is all about?” Danger watched the hands spring up around the room. “Yes, Mr. Black?”

“Comparative Cultures is where we learn about the differences between how wizards live and how Muggles live,” Johnny Black said, shifting position on the large cushion he'd claimed in lieu of a chair. “We look at what things changed when wizards stopped being secret and what things didn't, and how wizards and Muggles help each other today.”

“Very good.” Danger smiled approvingly. “Can anyone else add to that?”

A few other students volunteered answers. Draco barely heard them.

*Merlin's polka-dotted broomstick. It's Muggle Studies. I'm in another Muggle Studies class.*

*Only this one isn't a joke.*

“Excellent, everyone!” Danger turned to the piece of equipment sitting behind her. “Now, we're going to watch a film that was made before any of you were born, by a comedy team of four Muggles and two wizards, one of whom is a direct descendant of our own Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington—good afternoon, Sir Nicholas!”

The students all turned, Draco among them, in time to see the cheerily smiling Gryffindor ghost in his ruff and tights float through the door. “Good afternoon, Sir Nicholas!” they chanted, not quite as together as they had been to answer Danger but close enough.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Nearly Headless Nick said, nodding to them all, which caused his head to wobble a bit. “I hope you're having a good first day back.”

Loud variations on *Yes, we are* answered him.

“We're just going to watch a film, Sir Nicholas,” Danger said, tapping her wand against the television, which obediently turned on. “Will you stay and watch it with us?”

“Oh, I think so.” The ghost floated into place behind the students. “I do adore watching my twentieth-great-grandson at work.”

“This is good,” Abby whispered to Draco as Danger turned off the lights in the room and shut the blinds with her wand. “You'll like it. It's where that one funny line in Neville's song last night came from.”

“Thanks,” Draco whispered back, unsure if the recommendation of an eleven-year-old meant anything.

Five minutes into the film, he was no longer unsure.

*I haven't laughed this hard since the day the Venomous Tentacula bit Finch-Fletchley in the arse...*

## **Be Careful**

### **31: What You Create**

Draco was still snickering when he joined Ray and the rest of the usual crowd in an empty classroom on the fourth floor, Abby bouncing along behind him. *They're just about to attack the castle... and then they get arrested. Doesn't make a twig's worth of sense, but it's brilliant.*

“Out,” Ray said to his little sister, pointing at the door.

Abby pouted. “I never get to do anything.”

“You can come back when we have it working. I don't want to have to answer questions while I'm trying to do new magic.”

“Can she stay if she's quiet?” Draco asked.

“Is that possible?” Hermione said skeptically.

Abby clapped both hands across her mouth.

“We'll stand over here together,” said Luna, beckoning the littler girl to her side. “If we want to whisper, we'll do it quietly enough that we don't bother you.”

Draco gave Luna a thankful smile. *She's always so thoughtful...*

Quickly, he censored the following thoughts and edged into the small crowd around the table that Ray was bent over. “What's up?”

“Opposite of down,” Ginny quipped. Harry tweaked a bit of her hair.

“We're trying to see if we can't get a look at what's going on in your world,” Hermione said, waving at the bowl of water sitting on the table, surrounded by runes and complex strings of numbers. “We were able to build on the spell we used to send you that message back over the summer, but actual real-time seeing requires a focus point with more bilateral congruence.”

Draco frowned. “Say that again in English.”

“They want to use you to try to get a line on your world,” Meghan translated.

“Oh. Why didn't you just say so?”

“I did.” Hermione scowled. “It's not my fault none of you bother to learn the proper terminology.”

“Why should we bother?” Ron said, grinning. “We can just ask you.”

“I won't always be around, Ronald!”

“I thought that's what these were for.” Ron tapped at the broad gold ring on his left hand. “Or do you want a divorce already? I can't give you the house, we don't have one yet, but I suppose I could—”

Hermione shut him up firmly. Ray and Ginny exchanged an exasperated look, while Harry, Draco, and the rest of the group snickered.

“We got most of the build on the spell done already,” Neville put in. “Professor Flitwick's letting it count for the start of our independent Charms project.”

“Our? I thought these had to be done on your own. You know, independent.”

“No, that just means it's not part of a class. We can team up.” Neville grinned ruefully. “Good thing, too, with what I tend to do if I go out on my own. Remember Transfiguration last year?”

Everyone laughed.

“Enlighten me,” Draco said, leaning back against the table.

“That's what I said.” Neville assumed a stiffly upright pose. “And the next thing I knew, I was a candle, and my wick was just catching. Trouble was, no one knew which candle I'd been turned into, and there are thousands in the castle. By the time anyone could've found me, I'd have been burned right down the middle, but Harry snuffed all the fires in the castle right off, so I got away with a little scorched hair.”

“Every fire?” Draco raised an eyebrow at the unscarred image of his rival. “Impressive.”

Harry raised a hand and blew across his fingers. A flame sprang up at the end of each one. “Runs in the family,” he said. “I don't suggest you try to surprise Lyssa in the shower. Last bloke to do that still walks a little wide from where she flamed him.”

Every boy in the room winced in sympathy.

“I think it's ready,” Ray said, standing up. “Draco?”

“Where do you need me?” Draco stepped closer to the table, looking over the layout of the spell. If he didn't focus too hard on any one part, there seemed to be a pattern to it that whispered that his place was... “Here on the left?”

“Yeah. How'd you know?”

“Looked right. And don't even start.”

“Impressive,” said Harry. “I've never seen anyone stop him from making a stupid pun before.”

“You just aren't fast enough.” Draco placed his hand in a clear spot on the tabletop. “Here?”

“There.” Ray mirrored him on the other side of the bowl of water. “Now, if someone can get it activated for me, Hermione...”

“I'm coming, I'm coming, hold your thestrals,” Hermione grumbled, sliding between Ginny and Meghan. “All right, let me see...”

The spell was non-verbal, but Draco could feel the power building in the room as though he were outside before a storm. The hair on his arms prickled, and cold sweat began to break out on his shoulders. Ray, across from him, was shifting from foot to foot uneasily, rubbing at the back of his neck with his free hand.

Hermione's wand tip traced two graceful curves and a circle in the air, then jabbed forward. Draco felt a sudden jerk, as though a hook had caught in his robes and pulled him towards the bowl of water, and Ray stumbled a half-pace inward but recovered before he took his hand from its place on the table. “Is that it?” he asked his twin.

“That's it.” Hermione was breathing heavily, but her eyes were gleaming with satisfaction. “I think it's working. Take your hands away and see what happens.”

Draco lifted his hand from the table. Ray shook his out and transferred the motion to the rest of his body, shaking like a wet dog. “It'd better not have that kind of side effect every time we use it,” he said. “Otherwise no one's going to want to get near it.”

“I think it was just a first-time thing—” Hermione broke off with a gasp, and Draco couldn't blame her. He'd jumped back a pace himself.

The table was changing shapes.

Without spilling the water in the bowl, without even rippling it, the sides of the table folded down, the runes and numbers shifting their places, until what stood before them was a tall podium, the bowl perched on the left side of its slanted top with the outline of a human hand beside it.

“Is it done?” Abby whispered.

“I think so.” Hermione approached the podium cautiously. “I hadn't thought it would look like this, though. How would you even use it?”

“Overthinking a bit, Neenie?” Ray slipped around his sister and laid his hand against the outlined one on the podium's top.

The water in the bowl flashed once, then began to shine with steady light.

“There,” Ray said in satisfaction. “It's working.”

Hermione looked over her twin's shoulder. “Brilliant,” she said dryly. “We've created a transdimensional mirror.”

“What?” said Draco.

His voice echoed out of the bowl an instant later.

“That's not a real test, though,” said Harry. “Draco's here, so it won't have any trouble finding him. What about the other me? What's he doing?”

“I don't know.” Ray frowned at the outline of his hand. “There are runes by each of the fingers, but I'm not sure what they say...”

Draco crossed behind his friend to have a look, glancing into the bowl along the way. His own face looked back at him, with a thoughtful expression that surprised him.

*Funny how little I look like Lucius when I do that...*

“The one for the thumb is speech,” he said after a moment's examination. “The forefinger is growth. I don't think I know the others. Hermione?”

“Middle finger is two crossed,” Hermione reported after a moment of examining it. “Sight and growth together. The ring finger is time, and the little is backwards.”

“Now if we just knew what it meant,” said Ray, still watching the image in the bowl.

“Am I really that interesting?” Draco said. “You could just look up at me, you know.”

“I'm trying to see how much lag time it has. It'll be interesting to know if we're seeing what's happening as it happens, or if it's already happened...”

“Can I see that sight and growth one?” said Harry, coming forward to look at the runes himself. “How is it crossed?”

“Why don't you just try pressing down on one of them?” Ron suggested.

“Without knowing what they do?” Ginny turned on her brother. “Are you stupid? No, wait, forget I asked, of course you are. It's you.”

“Maybe sight and growth means the picture will get bigger,” Luna suggested from her place beside Abby. “So that we can all see it.”

“Worth a try.” Ray depressed his middle finger.

A picture sprang to life in the air in front of the podium. Draco stared at himself. Himself stared back.

*Should I say it? I don't know if I should say it. Maybe I'll say it anyway...*

“Do these robes make me look fat?” he asked, echoed a moment later by his doppelganger.

The girls all laughed, and the boys snickered appreciatively. Draco grinned and finger-combed an errant bit of hair back into place.

“So middle finger makes a picture we can all see,” said Ray, examining his hand. “Probably because everyone knows what that means.” Another round of snickers greeted this. “Thank you, thank you, I'll be here all week.”

“Won't your feet get tired?” Abby asked cheekily.

“Quiet, you. So just plain growth would probably...”

Draco's face in the picture grew until it filled the whole space, glowing peachy-pink.

“Do you mind?” Draco demanded.

His voice did not echo. The picture's lips moved, but no sound came from them.

“The thumb is like a mute button,” Hermione announced. “It turns the sound on and off.”

“Great.” Draco scowled at the picture. “Can we please shrink me back down to size? I don't look good this close up.”

“I bet you're gay,” said Harry.

Draco turned to him indignantly, about to snap back, then recognized the line from the film he'd just finished watching and answered Harry's grin with one of his own. “Am not.”

As if his image had been listening, it shrank back to human size, then farther, until there was a picture of the whole room hovering in front of the podium.

“So that's what the backwards is for,” said Ray. “When you add it to growth, it makes the picture smaller, so you can see more.”

Abby waved at herself.

“What about time?” Ginny asked. “Does that let you see the future?”

“I doubt it,” said Hermione. “That's really tricky magic, and I don't think we could have done it with something this simple. But maybe if you use that with backwards... that's it! Ray, try that!”

Ray pressed his last two fingers down. The scene froze, then began to move again, but this time the tiny people in it were moving backwards. Draco watched as the podium uncreated itself, as Hermione and Ron unkissed, as he walked backwards out of the room and up the hall, Abby behind him all the way—

“Let up on it, Ray,” Harry suggested. “Let's see if it goes normally.”

Ray released the pressure. The scene animated once more, Draco walking down the hallway and grinning, occasionally turning to say something to Abby.

“Try pressing the time finger once,” Neville said. “See what that does.”

Ray tapped his ring finger against the wood. Draco and Abby froze in place.

“It's just like a video player!” Abby exclaimed. “There's play, pause, rewind, mute, even zoom!”

“Abby, I think you just named this thing,” said Ray, lifting his hand from the podium. The picture vanished. “The TVP.”

“TVP?” asked everyone in semi-chorus.

“Transdimensional video player.” Ray grinned. “Always assuming the other part of it works. Harry, would you do the honors?”

“Gladly.” Harry stepped up to where Ray had been and placed his own hand against the outline. The bowl flashed once more. “Where do I press—ah, here.”

Another picture glowed to life—a tall, dark-bearded man lying unconscious on a forest floor.

“What the—” Harry snorted. “Ray, I think you dropped a decimal somewhere. That's not me.”

Draco leaned forward, peering intently at the face. “I know him,” he said. “I've seen him somewhere before. I think he works at the Ministry...”

Then he spotted something that hadn't been there an instant earlier. “Harry, zoom it in. Get it close on his face. I think I know what's going on.”

He allowed himself a second for amusement at his unthinkingly authoritative tone—to *Potter, of all people*—as the picture blurred, then reformed around a huge set of dark, threatening features.

“Oh!” Abby gasped. “I see it, Draco, I see it, I do!”

“What?” said Hermione, turning to face her sister. “What do you see?”

“The scar!” Abby pointed. “Remember, the very first day we met, Draco told us Harry in his world had a scar, and look, that man has one in just the right place!”

Everyone turned to look. Very faint on the high forehead, the thin line of a lightning-bolt scar could just be seen.

“Did we see into the future somehow?” said Ginny, though she sounded doubtful.

“Let's have a look around,” said Harry, wiggling his fingers. The picture shrank, revealing that the man was not alone. A woman, small and plump, and a mousy man with blood soaking his robes lay beside him.

“Ouch,” said Ron, looking at the bleeding man. “What d'you reckon happened to him?”

“Splinched himself,” said Neville in the tones of an expert.

“You would know,” said Harry. Meghan and Ginny smacked him from opposite sides. “Ow. Shall we try backing it up and see if we can't tell who they are?”

“You can if you want to see what happened to them,” said Luna, coming forward with Abby. “But who they are is easy. It's Harry and Ron and Hermione, from Draco's world, and they're under Polyjuice Potion. If you look, you can just see their hair starting to change back.”

“That's me?” Ron sucked air through his teeth. “That's going to hurt in an hour or two.”

“You're right,” said Hermione in a fascinated tone, staring at her other self. “They're the other us. But what happened to them?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Harry, and pressed down with his last two fingers.

## Be Careful 32: What Soul You Seek

“What's a Horcrux?”

*“Something out of a scare-story... at least, that's all I ever thought it was...”*

Abby's fearful words were still ringing in Draco's ears the next morning at breakfast. The scene they had witnessed with Potter, Weasley, and Granger the day before had answered questions he'd never allowed himself to think about before.

*Like how the Dark Lord did it. How he stayed alive all that time when his body was destroyed. How he can be so sure that he'll never die now.*

*He has soul-anchors. Horcruxes. Not one, but many. And some of them have been destroyed, but some haven't...*

Harry had backtracked to watch the disguised trio's raid on the Ministry, then a bit more to get some of their time staying at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, which address had sent Meghan into fits of laughter. It was hard, she explained between giggles, to take seriously the idea of your home, the place where you'd learned to toddle and fallen down the front steps and had accidents on the drawing room rugs, as a hideout in a desperate war against evil.

But watching Kreacher tell his story had taken the smile from Meghan's face, and several of the watchers had sniffed or blotted at their eyes. Draco could understand their feelings, if he didn't share them—Regulus Black was a person to them, their uncle or cousin or family friend, and to hear how another version of him had died had to be unsettling.

*Here's hoping I don't die trying to do what he did...*

Draco shook off this thought irritably. *Time to think straight. Lucky for us, running across the night they'd decided to start from the beginning and lay out everything they knew...*

*There were six Horcruxes. Potter killed the diary way back in second year—no wonder the Dark Lord was so hacked off at Lucius for giving it to Ginny. A brief snicker. Might be the only good thing my dear father's ever done. So that's one gone. And Dumbledore killed the ring, so that makes two. Four left. What do we know about them?*

Voices were starting to rise at the other end of the Great Hall. Draco ignored them. *Two of them,*

*we know both what they are and where—that's the locket and the snake. One, we know what it is, but not where—the cup. And one, we've got no clue, except that it'll likely be something of Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's.*

He took a sip of his tea. *I'd lean towards Ravenclaw, myself. The Dark Lord wouldn't want to use anything of Gryffindor's just on principle. If I can use that word in regards to him...*

“Harry Potter is a hero!” shouted a girl's voice, silencing all conversation in an instant. “Don't you dare tell lies about him!”

“Harry Potter's a liar and a thief, and a coward to boot!” Alecto gave a cackling laugh. “Else why doesn't he come out in the open, 'stead of skulking around in the shadows?”

All attention in the Hall was now focused on the spot between the Gryffindor table and the teachers', where Ginny Weasley, hands half-fisted, was staring down the Muggle Studies professor. “Harry is not a coward,” she hissed. “And he's never told a lie in his life.”

“Never told a lie, eh?” Alecto waved towards the center of the high table, where Snape sat motionless, watching the drama unfolding beneath him. “How d'ye account for him accusing an innocent man of murder, then?”

“Snape couldn't be innocent if he tried,” Ginny spat, her lip curling as she glared scorn at the Headmaster. “If Harry says he killed Professor Dumbledore, I believe it.”

“I'm sure you do, pretty one.” Alecto grinned, like a gash across her lumpen face. “Two days' detention for cheek, and three for vicious lies about your Headmaster. You'll report to the Dark Arts class after lunch tomorrow.” The grin grew wider. “They can use you to practice on.”

Draco bit back a groan just in time. “Weasley through and through, that one,” he muttered aloud. “All spunk, no brains.”

“Don't you mean Gryffindor through and through?” Nott scoffed from the other side of the table. “I hope I get to work on her!” His leer seemed to say he'd prefer to do that work without his robes, or Ginny's for that matter.

*Perverved little sod that he is.*

Belatedly, the meaning of Nott's comment registered with Draco.

*Wednesday Dark Arts—that's our class, my class, and they're sending her there for punishment—*

He swore silently. There was no way in the world, after nearly two months of watching Ginny laugh and flirt with Harry and dance about the stage with the other daughters, that he'd be able to torture her, not even knowing that she wasn't the same person as the one he'd befriended.

*Especially not if they try to make us use the Unforgivables. And they will.*

*Though wait—there might still be a way—*

Lost in planning, Draco barely noticed Blaise, beside him, push his plate away and get up from the table.

*Put on a good enough eager-little-arse-kisser face and no one notices anything else you might be or do...*

---

Ginny rounded the corner into an unoccupied section of hallway and leaned against the wall, shaking.

*Stupid, stupid girl, she scolded herself roundly. Words can't hurt Harry, especially when he's not here to hear them! Now you've got yourself a load of detentions, and you know they're not going to be anything nearly as nice as bottling boiling frog guts or picking out rotten flobberworms bare-handed...*

“Well, well,” said a cool voice. She looked up. Blaise Zabini stood over her, looking down his nose. “So the last of the Weasleys is the first one to be tamed.”

“Who said I was tame?” Ginny challenged, sliding a hand into her robes. If she could just get her wand, Fred and George had taught her the perfect charm for moments like this a few days before she got on the train...

Zabini's hand shot out and caught her wrist. “Oh, no, you don't,” he said, leaning down and giving her a faceful of strong cinnamon toothpaste smell. She coughed, turning aside. “Ah-ah. Look at me.” His other hand grasped her chin and turned it back towards him. “You're really not bad-looking, are you? I'll make you a deal, Weasley girl. You do a few simple things for me, and I'll make sure it gets around that you're under my protection and I wouldn't want you damaged. I'll even let you decide what we do—within reason, of course, I have my needs.” He smirked. “So what do you say?”

Ginny spat in his face. “Go to hell,” she snapped.

Zabini's eyes blazed, and he let go of her chin, first wiping his cheek with his sleeve, then swinging his hand back—

“Christ, Zabini, I knew you were desperate,” drawled a new voice. “But this is low even for you.”

Zabini let go of Ginny's wrist as if it were red-hot. Ginny snatched out her wand and spun to face the speaker. Draco Malfoy leaned against the corner of the hall, regarding them both with wry amusement.

“I mean, honestly,” he went on, giving Ginny a dismissive look. “Scrounging for Potter's leavings? She can't be good for much, or he'd have taken her with him instead of the Granger Mudblood.”

*God, I wish he had. Then I wouldn't have to stand here and listen to you.* Ginny tightened her grip on her wand. *You forget fast, don't you, Malfoy? What I did once, I can do again...*

“Besides, we should feel sorry for her,” Malfoy crooned in mock-pity. “Her dear brother's home sick. At least he's alive.” He laid a heavy emphasis on the last four words, looking hard at her.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Ginny growled.

“Means he's alive, doesn't it? He didn't die in the night and you just haven't had the owl yet?” Malfoy snorted. “I don't know why I'm wasting my time talking to you. Come on, Zabini, Slughorn'll be wondering where we are.”

Zabini had gone a greenish shade of gray. “You're not going to...”

“To what?” Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “To tell? You mean you don't want the whole school to know the only girl you can get is Potter's discard?”

“Keep your voice down!” Zabini hissed, looking wildly around.

Malfoy snickered. “Relax, Zabini, I won't tell anyone. Might be fun to watch you squirm, but I'd rather not start a feud two days into the new year.”

Zabini sagged in relief. “I owe you,” he said, snatching up his bag from where he'd set it down by the intersection of the halls and disappearing around the corner.

Malfoy watched him go for a second, then looked back at Ginny. “It's not safe for little girls to go wandering around on their own anymore,” he said softly. “Stay with your friends, and keep your wand handy. I might not be there next time.”

Ginny bared her teeth. “Sod off, Malfoy. I can take care of myself.”

“Tsk-tsk.” Malfoy shook his head sadly. “Such a dirty mouth, on such a pretty girl. I guess you don't need to know what I heard about Potter last night.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” The cry was half-involuntary, straight from Ginny's heart to her lips without invoking her brain in between. “What did—” She forced herself to silence, but the damage was done. She might as well finish it. “What did you hear?” she whispered, looking at the floor.

“Heard he's alive.” Malfoy's tone was studiously nonchalant, and Ginny glanced up to see him examining his fingernails. “Heard he's safe, more or less. Heard he found something he was looking for, without losing too much along the way.”

*Without losing too much—and he said earlier about Ron—oh, Merlin's robes, they're alive, they're all alive, they're safe out there somewhere—* Ginny's legs threatened to give way, and she braced herself against the wall.

*But there's just one problem.*

*This is Draco Malfoy I'm talking to.*

“How do I know you're telling the truth?” she challenged.

Malfoy met her eyes, and a smile spread across his face that was unlike anything she'd ever seen on him before. It reminded her a great deal of Fred and George.

“Trust me,” he said, and was gone before she could muster a reply.

---

“Look at her face!” Ginny pointed left-handed at her counterpart, frozen in the TVP projection, staring dumbfounded at the corner Draco had just walked around. “She looks like she's just hit the vanishing step by accident!”

“I don't think she knew quite what to do with my telling her to trust me,” Draco said, chuckling at the memory. “We haven't been on very good terms these past few years.”

“Bit of an understatement, that,” said Harry. “You do realize this thing will go back as far as we ask it to?”

“Oh God.” Draco dropped his head into his hands. “I'd say ‘I can explain’, but I really can't...”

“You were younger then,” said Hermione absently, her eyes still on the page she was reading of *The Lives of the Hogwarts Founders*. “You wouldn't do those things again, would you?”

“Not a fair question, Neenie,” Ray put in, meeting Draco's eyes. There was worry and understanding there, and Draco had a sudden suspicion his counterpart had looked farther back than Hogwarts. “If he says yes, you'll probably hex him on the spot.”

“No, it's all right.” Draco gave the question some thought, while the floating image of Ginny hurried up to another girl and began whispering urgently into an ear half-hidden by dark blonde hair.

*If I could start Hogwarts over, knowing what I know now...*

“I don't think I would,” he said finally. “Most of it ended up making me look stupid, and Potter and his friends look like heroes. Generally because that's exactly what we were being.”

Being able to admit it, say it out, was like dropping a heavy rucksack he hadn't known he'd been carrying. *I was stupid. Over and over, in just about every way you can imagine, I was an arse for six bloody years, and now that I've finally figured it out, it might be too late to change the way anyone thinks about me...*

*On the other hand, if everything works out the way I want it to, I won't have to care what any of them think of me, will I?*

The two girls in the projection had nearly reached their classroom. One of them turned to look

over her shoulder. The scene froze on the image of Luna's face, a slight wrinkle of worry creasing her usually smooth forehead.

*Well, maybe one person...*

A knock on the door destroyed this thought. Ginny jumped and took her hand away from the TVP, and the image vanished.

“Come in!” Ray called.

Professor Riddle opened the door. “I understand this is the headquarters of the Hogwarts Transdimensional Spy Association?” he said, generating a round of appreciative snickers. “How is it working?”

“Perfectly, sir,” said Ginny, waving to it. “Would you like to try it?”

“Yes, I think I would.” Professor Riddle came over to the podium and fitted his long-fingered hand against the outline, which shifted to accommodate him.

Draco sat up straighter, a shiver running down his spine. *Note to self: Do not look the Dark Lord in the eye any time soon.*

An image solidified in the air: Lord Voldemort, smiling coldly at something none of them could see. Little gasps and squeals ran through the room, and Ginny took a step back into Harry's arms.

“You had to live with that all summer?” said Ron. “And here I thought Auntie Muriel was the scariest houseguest going.” He imitated an old woman's cracked voice. ““Get me something to drink, boy, I'm a hundred and five!””

“I think that's enough of him.” Professor Riddle twitched his palm.

The image of Voldemort splintered and reformed into another—the snake Nagini, coiled on the back of her master's chair, her head lifted as if she were listening to something.

“Good,” Professor Riddle murmured. “And again...”

The image went black, with only flickers of light playing teasingly across whatever it was trying to show. Professor Riddle frowned at his hand. “Is there—ah, yes, I see it.” His fingers moved skillfully, and the picture froze, then moved forward at glacial speed.

“How unfair is that?” Ray muttered. “We made the thing, and he figures out how to use it better than us in just a couple seconds.”

“You created it to be easy to understand,” Professor Riddle said without turning around. “And I have many more years of experience deciphering magical artifacts than you do. Here we are.” His finger twitched, and the image froze again, a sliver of light showing its outlines clearly.

Hermione gasped. “It's the locket! The one we saw the other Harry and Ron and the other me taking yesterday!”

“So it is—and if we move out a bit...” Professor Riddle tapped another finger twice, and the picture pulled back to reveal that the locket lay under the robes of a drawn-faced young man with black hair and glasses. “We can see who has it now.”

“He needs to take it off,” Harry muttered, looking at his counterpart with worry. “It's not good for him.”

“No, it isn't. But we have no way of telling him that, so I think we can leave him for now.” Professor Riddle nodded to the image as it reformed once more. “What about this?”

Draco stared at the picture hovering in the air. “That looks familiar,” he said slowly.

“Like the inside of a Gringotts vault, maybe?” said Ray in a bored tone.

“No, I mean that particular one. I've been there before, but I can't remember when. Why are we seeing it now?”

“Up and to the right, Professor,” Neville said over the end of Draco's question, pointing. “Up on the shelf, look, there beside the helmet with the emeralds.”

“What?” said several people at once, but Draco was already following Neville's finger, and he spotted what Neville had an instant before Professor Riddle brought it into better focus.

“It's the cup,” he said. “One of the ones Potter doesn't know where to find. And—”

The picture was already changing. A huge, dimly-lit room came into focus, filled with heaps of broken and discarded things. In the center sat a battered cupboard, with a stone bust perched atop it, wearing a dusty wig and a bent tiara.

Draco frowned. “That's the Room of Hidden Things, it's here at Hogwarts, but what—”

Meghan and Hermione gasped in unison, and Luna gave a little cry of delight. “Ravenclaw's diadem! Daddy's always thought it was likely still at Hogwarts somewhere!”

“It may not be, in our world,” Professor Riddle cautioned. “And I doubt you would want this diadem, with what has been done to it.”

*What has been done to it—of course, it's a Horcrux, they're all Horcruxes! Professor Riddle can find them because the Dark Lord's his counterpart, the TVP must seek by soul! A wave of hot excitement swept across Draco. We know them all now, we know where they are—the Dark Lord's as good as defeated—*

*Not so fast, Malfoy, a voice at the back of Draco's mind warned. You think Potter's going to accept an anonymous owl telling him where to find these things? And even if he would, how's he*

*going to get into Gringotts, or Hogwarts? For that matter, how's he going to destroy the one he's got?*

“We're not finished,” he muttered aloud. “We've barely even started.”

“But we have started,” said Luna from behind him, making him jump. “That's worth something.”

“I hope you're right.”

“I know I am.” Luna smiled at him, and Draco felt his spirits rise.

*She's right. We have started. I'm not alone anymore.*

*As soon as I can pull this off, I never have to be alone again.*

*I think that's what you call incentive to do a good job of it...*

## Be Careful

### 33: What Trouble You Brew

“One, two, three, switch,” Draco chanted under his breath, stirring the contents of the cauldron rapidly. “One, two, three, switch.” The green potion, swirling counterclockwise, frothed around the stirring stick as he changed directions again. “One, two, three, switch.” With his left hand, he scooped up a tiny handful of gnat wings and dropped them in. “And one, two, three, stop.”

Quickly, he pulled the stick out of the potion and turned up the fire with his wand. The potion bubbled furiously, the level of liquid in the cauldron dropping at a rate Draco would have found alarming if he hadn't known it was supposed to happen.

*“This potion, properly made, is thicker than honey,”* he recalled Snape telling the fifth-year class in his precise tones. *“The excess liquid boils away very rapidly in the last step. Be careful not to allow your cauldron to boil dry, as the residue is highly flammable.”*

*And of course, what did Longbottom go and do?*

Draco snickered, thinking of the line Ginny had written for Neville. *I'll have to find out what exactly he's done. Compare notes on the two of them.*

The mark he'd made on the side of the cauldron came into sight, and Draco doused the fire with a flick of his wrist. The thick green goop remaining in the bottom didn't look appetizing in the least.

*Good thing it's not for me. Now, for the bit Meghan suggested...*

He upended the cauldron onto the marble workbench beside him and spread the potion across it with his wand as though he were frosting a cake. When it formed a thin layer of glistening green across most of the table, he pointed his wand sharply at it. “Glisseo!”

The potion solidified instantly, the Freezing Charm counteracting its residual heat and leaving it hard and dry.

*Perfect.*

Draco opened the bag he'd brought with him and hung it at one end of the bench, then aimed his wand at the hardened potion again. “Relashio,” he said softly, concentrating on making the spell low-power. *Just need enough to make it—*

The potion shattered in place, the shards jumping apart but not flying across the table or through the air.

Draco released a breath he hadn't been aware of holding. "That could've made a real mess," he said aloud.

"Indeed it could," said a voice behind him.

Draco jumped a foot and came down looking the other way. Snape stood in the doorway behind him, regarding the interior of the room with one lifted eyebrow. "Getting a head start on your homework, Malfoy?"

*Don't lie, he can ask Slughorn for the curriculum, besides I've always suspected he was a Legilimens...* "No, sir, it's..." The other world came to Draco's rescue. "An independent project. I was hoping to get a bit of extra credit from Professor Slughorn."

"Did you ask him for permission to use this classroom?"

"No, sir, but I was under the impression we were supposed to be learning all we could while we were here." Draco rounded the end of the workbench and swept the potion shards into their bag, then unhooked it from its magical holder and pulled the drawstring top tight. "I wasn't planning to leave a mess, and I haven't taken any supplies I'm not supposed to."

"I was not accusing you." Snape entered the room and headed for the cauldron. "What were you —"

"Scourgify," Draco said under his breath as he gathered up his supplies. His wand, held seemingly carelessly in his right hand, jumped slightly, and the smear of green he could see along the cauldron's rim vanished.

"—making?" Snape reached the cauldron and looked in. "Or would you prefer not to tell me," he finished, his chill tone making the words a statement instead of a question.

"Nothing illegal, or poisonous," Draco said, dumping the jars and bottles into his schoolbag. "It's for personal use."

"And that use is?" Snape barred his way as he made for the door.

Draco met the Headmaster's eyes for an instant, and allowed a partial image of the truth to cross his mind—the memory of Ginny Weasley glaring up with hatred at Blaise Zabini.

"Personal," he said, just as coldly as Snape, and stepped around his former Head of House to leave the room.

*Let him believe I'm after her for myself if he likes. Maybe it'll keep him from working out what I'm actually up to...*

---

For one second, Severus considered calling the boy back, but decided against it. *He will only be insolent, and I can work out what he was making easily enough. An unusual method of transporting it, but depending on what it was, he may be able to reliquify it before he uses it, or there may be no need...*

A quick charm netted him a handful of potion dust, and a quick sniff and a cautious taste told him what he needed to know. The boy had told him the truth—the potion was neither illegal nor poisonous when properly made, as this one had been.

*Now the only question is—why was he brewing that particular mixture, and for whom?*

It would not go amiss, Severus decided, to keep a closer eye on the boy.

*The young man, I should say. He seems to have found some measure of maturity this summer.*

*Too late, perhaps, but that is the way of the world.*

Vanishing his handful of potion, Severus left the classroom. Draco Malfoy, whatever he was doing, would keep. The staff meeting in ten minutes would not.

*At which mine is the unenviable task of keeping Minerva and Alecko from one another's throats.*

Tonight might well merit the use of one of his special potions, the sort he used to keep his worst nightmares at bay. The intriguing dreams they brought with them were a welcome side effect, featuring as they did a place where he could rest and a person in whom he could confide.

*Even if she is a figment of my imagination, a commingling of the only two women in whom I ever felt any sort of interest. He smiled without any real humor. I doubt I would have dared to tell either of them about her, even if the one had lived and the other were not already spoken for...*

---

Ginny held her head high as she walked slowly down the second-floor hallway. *I can't stop them from hurting me, but I can stop them from hearing me scream. I'll bite my own tongue out before I'll give them the satisfaction—*

Something slammed into her back, and a sharp pain seared through her neck where it met her left shoulder. She crashed into the wall and slid to the ground, winded.

“Why don't you watch where I'm going, Weaslette?” sneered Malfoy, stepping over her legs. “Maybe if I ask nicely, Professor Carrow'll let me put your eyes on stalks so you can look behind you. What do you think? Would Potter like a half-slug girlfriend?”

Ginny answered him with a gesture she'd learned from Charlie.

Malfoy smirked at her. “We can do that later. See you in class.”

As Ginny pulled herself upright, she felt a tickling sensation against her shoulder. Fishing down

the back of her robes, she discovered a neatly folded piece of parchment, smeared with blood that a probing finger to her neck confirmed was her own.

*It used to be that it was enough to stick the 'Kick Me' sign to somebody's robes, Malfoy...*

Bracing for a faceful of Gobstone liquid or some other unpleasant surprise, Ginny unfolded the paper. Five words were written on it in a neat, looping copperplate hand.

*How loud can you scream?*

“You'll never know,” Ginny promised in a whisper, her temper rising to the point where it overcame her fear.

*That slimy worm—it's not enough he pushes me around and lies to me about Harry, now he's found a way to make it look like I'm the one threatening him! If I ever get my hands on him—*

“Ginny?”

“Hello, Neville.” Ginny turned to look at her friend. “Is it time?”

“Almost.” Neville's round face was set, making him look heroic even through a developing black eye and two or three deep cuts. “I just wanted you to know that—”

“Do whatever you have to do,” Ginny interrupted him. “Don't get into trouble on my account.”

Neville shook his head. “I won't hurt you.”

“But they'll punish you!”

A little smile quirked one side of Neville's mouth, the sort of smile Ginny was more used to seeing on Harry or Ron. “Some things are worth getting punished for,” he said. “They can hurt me, but they can't turn me into one of them unless I let them. And I won't.”

Ginny returned the smile. “You're a good man, Neville Longbottom.”

“Thanks.” Neville offered her his arm, as though they were going to the Yule Ball again. Ginny laid her hand on it and squeezed once, comfortingly.

*I still wish you'd just do what they're asking and stay out of trouble... but then again, if you did that, you wouldn't be you.*

Side by side, the two Gryffindors walked into the Dark Arts classroom.

---

Neville massaged his left side, wincing. He was pretty sure one of his ribs was cracked, if not more, and his right knee might not get him all the way to the hospital wing before it gave out.

*At least they're still letting us get patched up. How long before they decide "troublemakers" shouldn't be allowed to see Madam Pomfrey?*

But whatever he felt like, Ginny had to feel worse. He craned his neck to see her, curled into a ball by the far wall. Parvati and Padma were kneeling beside her, whispering to her, but she didn't seem inclined to move. Neville wasn't surprised.

*Cruciatus on and off for twenty minutes, then Professor Carrow put her under Imperius and made her dance with him—she fought it, though, she was tripping over her own feet and falling every few paces, and of course that just made them all laugh harder...*

Neville could find only one piece of consolation in life. No former DA members had agreed to help torture Ginny. One or two Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had tried their hands at it, and of course the Slytherins had gleefully taken turns—none grinning wider than Malfoy—but every student in the class who owned a DA Galleon had refused Amycus Carrow's order to use the Cruciatus Curse on the youngest Weasley. Ernie Macmillan had gone so far as to inform the professor that he couldn't order them to do something that was against the law.

Neville winced again, remembering the reply to this. *"The law's what I say it is here, y'stupid prat! Do's you're told or you'll be next!"*

*And he will, too. We'll all be next. They'll keep hammering on us until we break. And it's no good to say we won't, because everyone has a breaking point. The scent of disinfectant and hospital linens seemed to pervade the room for a moment. Especially alone, without help, without hope, without something to hold onto...*

Across the room, Ginny sat up, her face streaked with tears but her jaw set firmly. She looked around, her eyes landing for one moment on every person who had participated in her "punishment". Neville didn't doubt for an instant that she was cataloguing their names and faces, preparing herself for the day when she might be asked who they were, so that the Aurors would know how many cells to prepare in Azkaban.

*She hasn't stopped believing. She hasn't given up. How can I? How can I even think about it?*

Neville clenched his teeth, reached up, and clambered to his feet, finding his knee a little more willing to take his weight than he'd thought at first.

*Harry's out there somewhere. And he's got Hermione with him, and I'd bet Ron too—awfully convenient, him getting sick just as Harry and Hermione vanish, and if Fred and George couldn't fake up a body that'd fool a Ministry inspector, I'll eat my cauldron.*

*Those three have never failed us yet. They're not about to start now.*

He limped across the room to Ginny and the Patils. "You all right?" he asked Ginny, offering a half-smile as an apology for the banality of the words—of course she wasn't all right, she'd been tortured, no one was all right when they'd been tortured—

Ginny's wand darted around them in a circle. "Muffliato," she whispered. "There, now we can talk, no one will hear us—Ron taught me that, he learned it from Harry—Neville, I am all right, this is going to sound insane and I don't know who put him up to it but someone got Malfoy to help me!"

"You're right," said Parvati before Neville could react. "It does sound insane."

"Why do you think that?" Padma added. "What did he do?"

"He shoved me down before class, and I felt something prick me. Then I found this inside my robes." Ginny held out a small, folded note. "I thought he was just being, you know, Malfoy—but when they started cursing me, it didn't hurt. I could feel it, the way you can feel a flame when you've used a Flame-Freezer, but it didn't hurt at all. I think it was a Painless Potion, Mum used to use them on me when I'd fall out of trees, this feels like that used to."

Padma frowned. "But you were screaming..."

Neville took the note and unfolded it. "That is what it says to do," he said, holding it out for the twins to read. "Do you know whose writing it is, Ginny?"

"Yes, but..." Ginny giggled slightly. "I don't think it will help much."

"Why not?" Parvati asked.

"Because it's mine."

"Yours?" said the twins together.

"Yes, but I didn't write it!" Ginny leaned back against the wall, her giggles becoming more pervasive. "That would be a bit silly, to write a note to myself!"

"Hysterical," Parvati mouthed to Neville, as Padma bent over Ginny and began making soothing noises.

Neville nodded and accepted the note back from Parvati as she turned to help her twin. Holding it, he couldn't help but notice how Ginny's blood had smeared across its back.

*But if she's right, that little pain stopped her from feeling a whole lot more. Neville stared across the room at Malfoy, who was repacking his bag nonchalantly. I don't know who told you to do that, Malfoy, but they're clever. Probably one of the teachers—they can't help us openly, but by using you, they can sneak us what we need...*

*We're not alone. We never really were.*

Professor Carrow had his back turned. Most of the Slytherins were snickering in a corner. Neville dug in his pocket until he found a familiar size and weight. Slowly, he withdrew the gleaming Galleon and got to his feet, holding it up for his classmates to see.

*The DA lives. We'll meet tomorrow night.*

*Bring your wand. You'll need it.*

He did not notice Malfoy's small, triumphant smile.

## **Be Careful**

### **34: When You Make Your Move**

“So you got them to start holding DA meetings again, you stopped Ginny going mad from the Cruciatus, and the rest of the school still thinks you're the same stuck-up git you've always been,” said Harry, ticking off points on his fingers. “I'd call that a successful week.”

“Week and a bit,” Draco corrected, scooting backwards to get the most out of his patch of sun. It was Saturday afternoon, and in a few minutes he'd be off to his first Animagus session, but for now he was lazing about with his friends, and he wanted to enjoy it to the fullest. “How about Potter and company?”

“Oh, they're hopeless,” said Hermione, her tone rich with scorn. “Sitting around that little tent all day talking in circles. I wish I knew when they were going to get a move on. And she says, the other me, that she doesn't dare do anything for Ron's arm because she might make him worse—with that and how much trouble they're having finding food, he'll be so weak pretty soon that the Horcrux will be able to take him over, at least partly, and then what are they going to do?”

“You calling me weak?” said Ron, tweaking one of his wife's curls where she lay with her head pillowed on his hip. “And you can't say it's just the other me, because we're a lot alike, more than you or Harry, so if you're talking about one of us, you're probably talking about the other too.”

Hermione sighed. “What I'm saying is, you're far and away the biggest of us,” she said, flicking Ron's hand away. “You need the most to eat, and you like it the best. Then, too, he lost a lot of blood when he got splinched, and he's not going to get it back any time soon with the way they're living. So physically, not morally, he's weak at this moment in time—it may bleed over into morally, it's hard to be brave when you're hungry and hurt, but just now it's physical. It's like he's missed two questions before the test even started.”

“I'd've said he was down two goals before the whistle blew.” Ron returned to his investigation of how far a brown curl could be stretched before it lost its shape. “So would he, probably.”

“It's interesting to think about,” said Luna, curled up against Ray's chest and running her fingers up and down the carpet as if it were a piano keyboard. “How much are we like our counterparts, and how much are we different—and why? Is it because of our parents, or our upbringing, or both?”

“I'd tend to think both,” said Neville, who was carefully replaiting one of Meghan's braids.

“When you're talking about people, you have to use the opposite of the usual rule. The most complicated answer is the true one.”

Draco sat up. “I bet I can prove that,” he said, looking around the group. “With four examples. One—” He pointed to Ron. “Two—” Harry. “Three—” Hermione. “And four.” Himself and Ray. “One for each way it can be the same or different.”

The group murmured confusion for a moment, until Ginny shook her hair back with a chuckle. “It's not that hard,” she said, favoring Draco with an open grin that reminded him forcibly of the wicked look which, a year and a half previously, had been the last thing he'd seen before a horde of bat-bogeys descended. “Ron and I are a lot like the others of us—I'd imagine Fred and George are too, and the older ones—because we have the same parents in both worlds, and both sets of us grew up magic at the Burrow. Right?”

“Right.” Draco waved a hand at Harry. “Same parents, different upbringing—Potter in my world grew up with a Muggle aunt and uncle and cousin, and you've got your parents still, and a load of brothers and sisters...”

“And there are times I'd swap them all for a nice quiet cupboard,” Harry put in. “But I see what you mean. One part the same, one part changed, still adds up to more alike than different.”

Draco nodded. “That goes for Hermione too, but the parts are the other way around. I can't be sure, I've never met them,” he said to the drowsy girl resting against Ron, “but I think your grandparents here are your parents there.”

“So there's a whole half of me that she doesn't have?” Hermione murmured. “No wonder she always looks so frantic.”

“But your argument doesn't hold up there,” Meghan objected. “That other Hermione grew up Muggle, not magic, and she was an only child.”

“Only and oldest are a lot alike,” Ray jumped in before Draco could answer. “And I think his point is that other-Hermione had a good home, she was happy there, her parents loved her and she loved them back. That's what matters, and what makes them so much the same.”

“Well, that and the half they share.” Draco spread his hands grandly. “And finally, the main event—the two counterparts no one would ever expect, who have absolutely nothing in common except the house they were born in—”

“No, we share blood,” Ray objected. “It's pretty far back, but it's there. The Manor accepts you.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it shouldn't.” Draco turned around, ostensibly to tilt his face into the sun, really so no one would see what he was feeling. “I'm descended from your ‘weird cousin’, remember? The one who tried to murder your however-many-greats-grandfather?”

“He didn't succeed,” Luna pointed out in her most rational tone. “Not here. And you can't be

responsible for what someone did a few hundred years ago. You have to live your life, not his. Besides, we like you, no matter whose blood you have.”

Draco snorted a reluctant laugh and turned back to face the group. “I should stop wallowing, shouldn't I?”

“You should,” said Harry, flopping over on his stomach. “But even if you don't, we love you anyway.”

“Gah!” Draco sprang up and backed away in mock horror. “Stay away from me, Potter! I have a wand, and I know how to use it!” He glanced at his left wrist while his friends laughed. “And I'm going to be late. See you after class.”

“Bye,” called several voices after him as he took off at a jog.

*At least now I know what I'm supposed to be learning how to turn into...*

He'd been rereading *The Jungle Books* in between classes at his own Hogwarts the day before and had turned idly to “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi”. The facing page of the opening of the tale bore a glorious illustration, featuring the mongoose protagonist standing up on his hind legs, turning his head back and forth to take in the whole of the garden, then scuttling into the nearby bungalow and out again before the sequence repeated.

Draco's only question had been how he'd missed seeing the picture for three full weeks.

*Rikki moves just like the animal the Manor, Malfoy Manor, said was me, and an animal that's me is my Animagus form, of course. Not too bad a one, either. Long and thin like a ferret, but known for killing snakes. Draco ran his tongue over his teeth, imagining them sharp as knives and ready to pierce scales. Too bad mongoose bite isn't one of the ways you can kill Horcruxes!*

His feet speeded up their pace, carrying him faster and faster into his future.

*I'll kill Horcruxes myself if I have to, but I'd much rather set it up and let Potter do it. Meanwhile, I can keep dancing my little dance, distracting the Dark Lord. Then, when he's not expecting it, wham. Draco flashed a brief, savage grin at a passing third year, who jumped back, startled. Knife in the back, just like Lucius always taught me. Or maybe I should say teeth above the hood...*

He adopted a little boy's saccharine tones inside his mind. *Look, Daddy, I'm all grown up, and haven't I learned my lessons well? Will you be proud of me now?*

Draco's low laughter filled the halls behind him as he continued on his way.

---

Elsewhere in the castle, a door creaked. One bright hazel eye peered around it and surveyed the room beyond. Empty, except for the tall boxlike structure to one side with the bowl perched atop

it—the TVP, unattended at this hour.

Abby slid through the small crack between door and jamb, then pulled the door shut behind her. “I can't use you like Ray and Neenie do,” she said to the magical artifact, walking over to it to get a closer look. “Or Harry and the others. I don't have a counterpart in the other world, so it wouldn't work for me. Meghan tried, and it didn't give her a picture at all.” She sighed, thinking of all the fun people the other world was missing.

*But if I can't use it that way, I might be able to use it another.*

Abby rapped the podium with her wand. “Box, please,” she said in the brisk-yet-polite tone she used with house-elves and her younger siblings and cousins. A cubic section slid out of the podium, its top at her knee level, and she smiled. “Thank you!” Climbing nimbly onto it, she surveyed her new kingdom.

*Hand goes there. Picture comes here. It looks simple enough.*

Tucking her wand away, Abby swallowed. “I'm not sure I want to do this,” she admitted aloud. “Draco's world is very dark, especially right now. I'll See a lot of things that will hurt me, and I won't be able to fix any of them.”

But that wasn't precisely true. Anything Draco could reach to fix, without putting himself in harm's way, Abby was sure he would, once she told him about it. And even the things he couldn't fix, he might be able to make better.

*There will still be a lot of hurting for me to See. A lot of people hurting other people on purpose, and liking it. She shuddered, hugging her arms tight around her middle. And Mother said if I Saw too much that was bad now while I was young, I might forget how to see the good that might happen, and that would be worse than if I couldn't See at all...*

But with Draco fighting for the Light, and the other Harry and Ron and Hermione and Neville and Ginny and Luna, there was really no way the Dark could win, Abby reminded herself. There would be hurting and pain and crying, but in the end, good would win, because that was the way it always was.

*Bad can win for a little while, or even a big while, but life is a good thing, so as long as people are alive, good always wins in the end.* Abby smiled a little. *We just can't always see when the end is.*

Her mind made up, she pressed her hand to the outline, which shrank until the line seemed to have been drawn around the delicate fingers that encompassed it now.

Pictures flickered into life in the depths of the bowl. Eagerly, Abby leaned forward to watch.

---

Draco was just mastering the peculiar turn-and-flick motion needed for his first Animagus spell

when he heard the cry. It began as a rising shriek like a banshee's scream, then turned into a child's heartbroken wail, and in that instant he placed a name to it.

*Abby.*

He was on his feet and out the door before Professor McGonagall had more than looked up, running flat-out towards the room on the fourth floor where he somehow knew he would find her. Ray and Hermione pounded up from the opposite direction, Moony was a few steps behind them, but it was Draco who wrenched the door open and darted inside in time to catch Abby as she fell limply from her perch. Her eyes flickered open as their skin brushed together, and she stared uncomprehending for a moment before recognizing him.

“Draco,” she gasped, reaching out blindly. Draco freed a hand and grasped hers, holding it as tightly as he dared. “Draco, don't move, don't move! You have to promise, you have to swear you won't move!”

Draco froze in place, his eyes scanning the room. *What does she see—or See?*

“Abby,” Moony said calmly, going to one knee to address his daughter. “Is this for now, or for another time?”

“Another time.” Abby's hand tightened around Draco's. “The last day. The last minute. You have to promise, Draco. Promise you won't move.” Her voice lost a little of its terrified quality and became demanding. “Promise right now, or I won't tell you what else you need to know.”

Moony quirked an eyebrow at Draco, who had to stifle a laugh. “I promise,” he said, shifting Abby's weight on his arm. “I won't move.”

“Good.” Abby let out a sigh and seemed to become twice as heavy. “Saint Luke's Day,” she murmured, her eyes drifting shut. “Christmas Eve. Good Friday, and Walpurgisnacht...”

“What?” said the four adults in the room at the same time.

Abby opened one eye and smiled sweetly. “Neenie wanted to know when they'd get a move on,” she said with a yawn. “That's when. Those days.” Another yawn, and she nestled her face into the crook of Draco's elbow. “When I wake up, maybe I'll remember... what they do... then...”

The last word trailed off into silence.

Draco met Ray's eyes first, then Hermione's. The same wild anticipation lurked in both of them that Draco could feel rising in his own chest.

*We have dates. We know when they'll move. And if we can just get a good enough look at where they are the day before, I can Apparate there out of Hogsmeade—I'm sure I can get permission to go out even if it's not a weekend, being Draco flipping Malfoy might as well work in my favor for once—and leave what we know where they'll find it...*

*The Headmaster did say he expected the war—pardon me, the ‘present unpleasantness’—to be over by the end of this school year. Draco grinned, hoisting Abby into his arms. Let's see if we can't oblige him.*

## **Be Careful**

### **35: Who You Call Family**

“I worry about them sometimes.”

Ray turned away from watching Draco sitting quietly in a wooden chair beside Abby's bed in the hospital wing to look at his twin. “Worry about who? And why?”

“Those two.” Hermione waved a hand in Abby and Draco's general direction. “They seem... I don't know how to put it. Mismatched, perhaps?”

Ray shrugged. “I've seen worse. If he's willing to wait that long, Abby could do worse. But I don't think that's where either of them is really headed, Neenie. It just doesn't feel like that sort of thing.”

“I hope you're right.” Hermione smiled ruefully. “Aren't I supposed to be the one of us who understands feelings? Being the girl and all?”

“How old-fashioned.” Ray stuck his nose in the air. “As if boys can't understand feelings.”

“Most of you don't.”

“That's just because you girls insist on making everything so complicated. There's food, there's Quidditch, there's theatre, and there's kissing. Either you want them or you don't. What's so hard to understand about that?”

Hermione stared at her brother. “You can't be serious.”

“You can't have given me a straight line like that.” Ray grinned. “If I were serious, I'd be grown up and married to Aunt Letha, and I'd live in London at number twelve...”

Hermione lunged. Ray dodged out the door. “Come back here!” his twin screeched, though the effect was rather spoiled by her giggles as she gave chase. “When I get my hands on you...”

“You've been saying that since we were four, but you never finish the sentence!”

“That's because I'm still deciding what would hurt the most!”

---

Draco smiled at the sound of Ray and Neenie's affectionate rivalry, but absently. Most of his attention was on the little girl lying still and silent on the bed beside him, her chest rising and falling in a slow rhythm too quiet to hear.

*Get better soon, Abby, he willed her. I need to know just a little bit more about what you Saw...*

A footstep at the door brought his head around in time to see Danger coming in. She rested her hands on the small of her back and stretched, then crossed the room and sat down on the next bed to her daughter's. "Christmas cannot come too soon for me," she said, massaging her swollen stomach with one hand. "I love all my children, I will love this one just as much as the rest, but this is positively the last." Her other hand went out and stroked a piece of Abby's hair out of the girl's face. "Has she woken at all?"

Draco shook his head. His eyes kept creeping back towards Danger's belly—he'd known, in a general textbook way, what a pregnant woman looked like, but Danger was the first he'd ever seen up close. He'd managed not to stare through the summer, he was doing his best now, Mum would be annoyed with him if she heard he was being rude, but he couldn't help being curious...

Danger caught his gaze with her own and smiled. "It's all right," she said. "You can look. If you ask nicely, you can even touch."

Draco felt his cheeks go brilliant pink. "I don't want to intrude," he mumbled, staring at the floor.

"Once you've asked, it's not an intrusion. And I'll take the thought for the deed. Come here."

Draco recognized an order when he heard one, kindly worded though it was. Thinking of ice creams and sleigh rides in an effort to cool his blush, he scooted over to the bed where Danger was sitting, then tentatively laid his hand against the taut curve of her stomach.

"Say hello, little one," Danger murmured. "This is a new friend for you to meet."

A few seconds later, a definite impact thumped against the center of Draco's palm. He nearly jumped off the bed. "Was that—"

"That was a kick," Danger said. "You were lucky—she's almost never so prompt. Not even born yet and already trouble." Her sigh prophesied years of trouble ahead for her and Moony. "Of course, it could just be that you have a way with my daughters."

"Daughters? Is this one a girl, then?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think she is, yes. I tend to have feelings one way or the other as the time draws nearer, and I've been feeling definitely girl-ish for a month or so now." Danger chuckled. "Ray and Neenie kept me guessing until the day they were born, but I was younger then, and I didn't know what to make of the mixed signals I kept getting. Boy and girl twins cleared it up nicely, and all the rest have come on their own, so I've been able to tell."

"I heard something about them," Draco said, deciding this was as good a time as any to ask about

what Luna had told him over the summer. “Ray and Neenie, I mean. Is it true Moony used to be—I mean, with his nickname and all, and his counterpart back in my world was one of my professors third year but he had to leave when people found out he was—”

“A werewolf?” Danger finished. “Yes, Remus was bitten when he was four. It never made a difference to me, except that he insisted I finish my Animagus studies before he would officially date me, but we were afraid it would keep us from having children.”

Draco frowned. “I've never heard of that being a problem before. Professor Lupin, his counterpart, Moony's, I mean, he just married a cousin of mine over the summer, and I heard she's already...” He trailed off, seeing the expression on Danger's face go from curiosity to quiet sorrow. “Did I say something?”

“No.” Danger glanced down at Abby, who had shifted in her sleep, then lifted her eyes to the ceiling. “You can't help the facts of life in your world. And I will admit I had wondered, if Hermione was my parents' child instead of mine, what might have happened to me. I suppose now I know.” She turned back to him, her usual thoughtful smile back in place. “I hope you'll forgive me for preferring my own world.”

“Nothing to forgive,” Draco said promptly. “I prefer your world too.”

Danger laughed. “I don't blame you. So yes, among the differences between the worlds, we can add that here, lycanthropy makes its victim unable to have children.” A grin of pure mischief flashed across her face, making her look very like Ray for a moment. “Or it did, until eighteen years ago. The process was highly technical, I won't bore you with the details, but Ray and Neenie were the result, and...” She stopped, looking thoughtful. “How much theory does your Charms curriculum cover, Draco? That would be the only class I've heard you talk about where this might be covered. ”

“Not too much,” Draco said, casting his mind back over his six years with Professor Flitwick. “It's mostly practical, learning and practicing the spells—sometimes the teacher brings up the Laws of Magic, but I don't think I've ever seen a complete list of them.”

“Given that the best scholars in the world can't agree on exactly what they are, that would make sense.” Danger drew her wand and slid down a short way on the bed, smoothing flat a piece of the duvet between her and Draco. “All right, here's your extra credit Comparative Cultures assignment for today. A bit of logic for you, and what you can and can't prove from certain statements.”

She began to write with her wand as with a quill, and letters of light appeared on the duvet: *If a person is a Muggle, then he cannot do magic.* “Does that make sense?” she asked.

“Yes...” Draco wondered what Danger was getting at. Everyone knew that.

Danger wrote a second sentence under the first: *If a person cannot do magic, then he is a Muggle.*

“That's not right,” Draco protested. “Squibs can't do magic, but they aren't Muggles.”

“Oh, you are good!” Danger's smile warmed him, and he returned it without thinking. “Just bear with me for a moment or two. You'll understand as soon as I get all four down—that's called the converse, and the inverse looks like this...”

---

“And it was really that easy?” Draco said in surprise when the lesson was over. “Everyone talks as if...”

“I know.” Danger sighed, shaking her head. “Part of it is entrenched beliefs—the feeling that surely if it was out there to be found, someone would have found it by now—but part of it, I think, is the general wizarding belief that werewolves deserve what they get, that they're...”

“Dirty,” Draco filled in, the night before he'd first traveled to the other world playing itself back in his mind. “Worse even than Muggles.”

Danger slid closer to him. “You sound troubled,” she said, holding out her hand. “I may not be your mum, but I can listen.”

Draco reached for her hand, took a breath to answer—

“I'm sorry, am I intruding?”

Two heads jerked around. Moony stood a few feet away, looking between them and Abby, still unconscious on her bed. “I just came down to check on Joy, but you seem to have everything under control, love—”

“No, please do stay,” Danger said, beckoning her husband closer. “I think perhaps you should hear this.”

Moony took a seat on the bottom of Abby's bed, a polite half-bedwidth between him and Draco. “I think perhaps that depends on the teller,” he said deliberately.

“Oh, watch me forget my manners.” Danger covered her mouth, chagrined. “Draco, do you mind? If this is what I think it is, Remus would be the one who could help you understand it best, but it's entirely up to you...”

Draco managed to say something that sounded like a request for a moment to think, at least he thought it did. His mind was occupied with other matters.

To this point, he'd managed to ignore, or overlook, the fact that Abby and Ray and Neenie's father, his host for the summer, and his own father's closest counterpart was, or had been at some point, a werewolf. Somewhere inside him, there lived a little boy who still believed the spooky bedtime stories of prowling werewolves snatching bad children from their beds, who had lain awake on full moon nights shivering at every creak in the floor and huddling in a ball under the covers, who had

sometimes awakened screaming from nightmares of bloody-fanged monsters chasing him down.

*But I'm not a little boy. I'm adult now, and I need to act like it. Besides, I've handled the Dark Lord's counterpart just fine—why should an ex-werewolf bother me?*

That made perfect logical sense, but didn't seem to be convincing his emotions much, Draco noted dryly.

Then another thought occurred to him.

*If I'd been born in this world, Moony would have been the one coming in to wake me from those nightmares. He'd have stayed with me until I calmed down, maybe let me leave the light on all night, or even taken me back to his and Danger's bedroom to be sure nothing could get me.*

*And right now, he's willing to do the equivalent for somebody my age. Listen to what's bothering me, give me advice if he can.*

*He's not a monster. He's a father.*

*Just because Lucius manages to combine the two doesn't mean everyone does.*

The thought made Draco smile, and it was with that expression that he looked up.

“Please do stay,” he said to Moony. “It's not a nice story, but what else is new with me?”

---

The tale of the night before his life changed took less time to tell than Draco had expected. Moony and Danger both burst out laughing when he told them the name of Remus Lupin's wife, and Moony grinned at the question Draco had been asked by the Dark Lord. “We haven't given you much choice about cub-sitting, have we?” he said when the story was over. “I'm afraid it's just the way we are—our particular set of cubs have grown up expecting that anyone who's welcome in the house is a friend, which to them is the same as a member of the family.”

“I don't mind it.” Draco scowled, thinking of the night he'd narrated and the year that had preceded it. “I mind being used and set up to fail. I mind being a laughingstock in my own house, and having to watch my back every second of the day. If it's a choice between that or Dragon wanting me to read him just one more bedtime story...” He had to stop and look away, blinking hard.

“I wished, that night, for someplace I could start over,” he said when he could speak again. “And that's what I found here. You treated me like a friend, like family, from the beginning. You didn't have to, maybe you shouldn't have, but you did, and I could do chores for the rest of my life before I could even start making up for that.”

Danger got to him first by virtue of being closer. “No need to make up anything,” she told him, holding him by the shoulders and shaking him gently. “No debts, no grudges. That's not our way,

and you belong to us now.”

“Even if we wanted to send you away, which we don't,” Moony added, joining them and putting his arms around them both, “we'd have to fight off our own cubs to manage it. Not to mention half the population of Hogwarts. You've been making yourself quite popular, did you know that?”

Not trusting his voice, Draco shook his head.

“Well, it's true.” Danger gave him a brisk peck on the forehead. “And once you've finished school, you are always welcome at the Manor, though you might prefer Cecy's place; she lives in town, up the street from Sirius and his family—well, good morning, sleepyhead!”

Draco turned to see Abby pushing herself upright with one hand, rubbing at her eyes with the other. Moony went to her side, putting an arm around her to hold her in place. “Did you dream, Joy?” he asked her.

“Uh-huh. Is Draco here?”

“I'm here,” Draco said, sliding out of Danger's arms to sit down on the bed Abby'd used. “Did you remember something about one of those days you told me?”

Abby nodded. “Ron's going to go away from Harry and Hermione on St. Luke's Day,” she said. “And you do something funny.” She giggled, then sobered. “But I don't remember what. I do remember you need to know exactly where the cup is before that day or you'll miss your big chance to get it. It's the hardest one besides the snake.”

“Weasley leaves, I do something funny, need to know what vault the cup is in, before St. Luke's Day,” Draco muttered, committing it to memory. “It would help if I knew when St. Luke's Day was, wouldn't it?”

“18 October,” said Danger.

Moony, Draco, and Abby all turned to stare at her. She chuckled. “I was marking Hogsmeade weekends on my calendar and I happened to notice it, that's all. No visions for me, not this time.”

“It's a Hogsmeade weekend?” Draco grinned. “Brilliant. As long as that carries over, I think I've got a fair idea what I need to do...”

## **Be Careful**

### **36: Whom You Tease**

“Ginny, I really don't think this is a good idea—”

“It's something we can do to help Harry!”

“I want to help Harry as much as you do, but I don't see how we can do this!” Neville flipped through the pages of the huge book he had open on the library table in front of them, the sound masking their voices from observers. “Unless you have that Map of Harry's—which I wish he'd left with us, if he knew he was going away like this—I have no idea how we're going to get inside Snape's office, much less sneak out with something the size of the sword of Gryffindor!”

“Neither do I. Yet.” Ginny's face was mulish, and Neville had a terrible suspicion that any of her brothers could have told him it was hopeless to argue with her when she was like this. “But I told you yesterday, I'm going to do it anyway. Whether you come is up to you, but Dumbledore wanted Harry to have the sword, and Harry doesn't have the sword, and if that's the difference between life and death for him, or for Hermione or Ron, and we could have done something about it...”

Neville sighed. “All right. All right. I didn't say I wouldn't help, I just said I didn't know how we were going to do it. And keep your voice down.” Madam Pince appeared at the end of the nearest row of books, and Neville gave her a sickly smile. She emitted a small hmph, turned to go, then seemed to change her mind, looking back over her shoulder.

“If you're waiting for the Lovegood girl,” she said, “I suggest you try outside in the hallway. She seems to be quite the center of attention.”

Neville and Ginny exchanged glances, stood at the same moment, and followed the librarian back through the bookshelves.

A circle of students, some laughing and jeering, others with thin lips and grim expressions, had formed outside the library door, which Seamus hastily shut as soon as Neville and Ginny were in the hall. “Parvati and I tried to stop him,” he hissed to them. “But the other Slytherins wouldn't let us, and when we tried again, she waved us off! It's like she's enjoying it or something!”

Neville turned to look. Ginny was already watching, red spots beginning to appear in the center of each freckled cheek.

“Here, birdie, birdie,” taunted Draco Malfoy, dangling a book over Luna's head. “Come on, birdie, fly for it! Fly for your pretty book!” Luna's bag sat at his heels, sagging and half-empty, and a lopsided pile of books and papers was slowly tipping over behind Luna. Still, Luna looked as cheerful as always, and seemed perfectly willing to jump and snatch at her book, even as Malfoy jerked it away repeatedly, laughing.

“How long has he been doing this to her?” Neville asked, putting out a restraining hand to hold Ginny's arm.

“Don't know. I just got here five minutes ago. Was going to try to get some research done for Transfiguration, but...” Seamus shrugged. “Hard to stop watching, y'know?”

Luna caught hold of her book at last, and Malfoy released it. “Good for you, Loopy Loony,” he sing-songed. “How about we make this the last round? Winner takes all?” He scooped up her bag and wiggled it at her. “You have to come and get it. No more easy jumping in place. Come on, little birdie, I know you want it...”

“I can't watch this,” Ginny hissed. “Let go of me.”

Luna glanced to the side and shook her head sharply, then turned back to Malfoy and began to circle him. Malfoy countered, shaking the bag in front of him as though trying to lure her with it. “Can't get it from there,” he crooned. “You have to come in for it sometime...”

Finally, Luna leapt forward and snagged one of her bag's straps. Malfoy jerked back on the bag, and Luna staggered towards him, only to have him catch her wrist and pull her in the rest of the way. “Hmm,” he said, looking down at her. “Should I or shouldn't I?”

“I said let go!” Ginny put her hand around Neville's and squeezed at a certain spot. He let go with a gasp of pain, but Lavender Brown and Hannah Abbott grabbed Ginny instead, holding her arms pinioned.

“Do you really want to?” said Luna, looking up into Malfoy's face. Her voice held no trace of fear. “Like this?”

“A good question.” Malfoy inspected Luna from several angles, holding her out at arm's length, turning her around, even tapping her lips with a finger. Obediently, she opened them, and he peered at her teeth. A furious, muffled snarl burst from Ginny, whose mouth was now being covered by the robed arm of Michael Corner.

“I don't think so,” said Malfoy at length, as though he were dismissing a set of robes that had been brought out for his consideration. “Not today, at any rate.” He released Luna, who straightened her hair, then bent to pick up her bag. Gray eyes rested appreciatively on the part of her thus displayed.

Neville got himself under control and pushed between a pair of Hufflepuffs to face Malfoy. “You've had your fun,” he told the Slytherin. “Now leave her alone. Show's over,” he added more

loudly to the rest of the crowd. "We've all got homework. Let's not forget we're here to learn."

"That's right, Longbottom, you are," Malfoy said softly as the crowd began to break up and drift away. "Here to learn how life really works. Who's in charge, what you can and can't get away with. That sort of thing."

"Even you can't get away with that forever, Malfoy." Neville pointed to Luna, who was now putting her books back into her bag with the help of Su Li and Padma Patil. "She's nothing to do with you, or any of this. Let her be."

"Don't lie to me, Longbottom," Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "I know she's one of the ringleaders of whatever Potter left behind him here, with you and Weasel-girl there. And her dad's busy writing against the Dark Lord and for Harry Potter, which would make her a person of interest even if she'd never done a thing wrong. Which she has. I remember Umbridge's office even if you don't."

Behind Neville, a boy yelled in pain. He whirled to see Corner yanking his arm away from Ginny's mouth, shaking it furiously. "That's no reason for you to treat her like your property, Malferret!" Ginny shouted, though Lavender and Hannah were still thwarting her every effort to get at Malfoy. "She's as pureblood as you are, if you want to put it on those terms—and more importantly, she's a human being, not a slave you can buy and sell!"

"Sorry," Corner mouthed to Neville. "She bites."

"As pureblood as I am? *Her?*" Malfoy packed enough scorn for three books into the one-syllable word. "I gravely doubt it. But still... how many generations, Lovegood?"

Luna looked up from her bag. "I don't recall exactly," she said. "I'd have to ask Daddy. He has our family tree. But I think it's at least five or six."

"So much?" Malfoy looked impressed. "You might do at that. Need some training, of course, but you show promise. I'll have to write Father about it."

"Training?" Neville asked, though he was certain he wasn't going to like the answer. "For what?"

Malfoy chuckled. "Only the Dark Lord will live forever, Longbottom." He looked Luna up and down once more, then picked up his own bag from where it had been sitting a few paces behind him. "One of these days, I'm going to need a wife."

"Over my dead body," Ginny hissed.

"Really now, Weasley, how uncouth." Malfoy lifted an eyebrow at her. "If you want me that much for yourself, try to cultivate a gentler manner. I prefer waking up in the mornings alive."

Ginny turned redder than her hair. Several strangled bits of words emerged from her lips, then nothing.

“Though I suppose you'd ensure every day was an adventure.” Malfoy slung his bag over his shoulder. “I'll simply have to think about it more. Until next time, all.”

Neville watched the blond boy out of sight, then went to one knee beside Luna. “I'm sorry we weren't there to stop him,” he said, giving her a brief hug. “You're not hurt?”

“I'm fine.” Luna slid a last quill into her bag and smiled at him. “And it's perfectly all right that you didn't stop it. I didn't want it stopped.”

“Why not?” Ginny demanded, dropping down next to them. The DA members left in the hall clustered around, protecting them from hostile eyes and ears. “He was being horrible to you! Stealing your things, making you jump and dance like that to get them back—and then the way he was holding you, and looking at you!”

“He was only playing,” said Luna placidly. “And I don't mind playing, not with him. He doesn't mean anything bad by it.”

“Yes, Luna, he does mean something bad by it,” said Ginny with forced patience. “You heard him. He's looking for a wife. And you know what that means—or do you?”

Luna giggled a little. “Yes, Ginny, I know where babies come from,” she said. “But I don't really think Malfoy would make me marry him if I didn't want to. He was only saying that because he likes to watch you change color. This is all a great big game to him, and he scores points when it looks like he's doing what they expect him to do.”

Neville frowned. “When it looks like? Luna, he is doing what they expect him to do. He's humiliating us, and building himself up with it.”

Luna shook her head. “I don't think he is. Not the way he used to be.”

“I know you want to believe the best of everyone, Luna,” said Ginny, reaching out a hand to her friend. “But Malfoy is... well, he's Malfoy. He'll never change.”

“Hear, hear,” muttered Seamus, whose left eye was swollen shut from where Malfoy had shoved him into a door a day or two ago.

“If you say so,” said Luna, getting to her feet. “Neville, weren't you going to show me and Ginny that one spell Harry taught you last year?”

Harry's name had the desired effect. The DA, grinning furtively at each other, melted away into the halls, and Neville, Ginny, and Luna entered the library together, returning to the table where Neville and Ginny had been sitting earlier.

“Ginny, I understand what you're saying,” Luna said when Neville was once again rippling the pages of the huge book. “But I really do think Malfoy has changed, at least a little bit. Didn't you say yourself he stopped Zabini from hitting you?”

“That's just because he fancies me for himself!” Ginny gagged. “I'd rather bed a real dragon.”

“And Neville, he was almost being nice to you,” Luna persevered. “Not in a way that would make anyone notice, but he didn't hex you once, and some of what he said sounded like he was trying to warn you. To tell you the Carrows know that you and Ginny and I are the ones behind the DA, that they're watching us. And Daddy.” She swallowed once. “I'll have to write to him tonight.”

“And ask for your family tree, right?” said Neville, mustering a smile. “Luna, if you want to believe Malfoy's on our side, that's wonderful. But we're trying to figure out a way to get into Snape's office, and we could use your help.”

“Oh, that's right.” Luna reached into her bag and produced a folded-up piece of parchment. “I almost forgot. When I was putting my books back into my bag, this fell out of Truly Fantastic Beasts and Where Not to Find Them. And I know it wasn't there this morning, because I looked all through it to find my notes on Gyroblasts, and they were the only things between the pages.”

Slowly, Ginny unfolded the piece of parchment.

“It's in my handwriting, but I know I didn't write it,” Luna added. “And that book hadn't been out of my bag all day until just now. So you see, I really think Malfoy may be trying to help us.”

Neville leaned in to look over Ginny's shoulder.

*The password to the place you're trying to get into is “Hufflepuff,” the note read. And don't worry. You're just as sane as I am.*

“Giving us the password to Snape's office?” Neville shook his head. “He's mad.”

“I think that's the point,” Ginny said in a slightly strangled tone. “Luna, you're sure you didn't write this?”

“I don't remember writing it, or putting it in the book. And how would I know the password?”

“I don't know—but I can believe that you found it out, wrote it, put it in the book, and forgot about it much more easily than I can believe that Draco Malfoy is suddenly on our side!”

“He's not,” said Luna. “He's on his own side, like he always is. But right now, he wants to help us, and I think we should take it. We need all the help we can get.”

“Look, we won't lose anything by trying it out,” Neville interjected before Ginny could reply to this. “We'll get Peeves to make a disturbance down in the kitchens tomorrow morning on break to be sure Snape's not in, then go and try it out. If it works...”

*Then we may have an ally we didn't expect.*

*We could use something going right this year for a change. Which probably means it won't, but you never know. We could get lucky.*

“We'll try it tomorrow,” he repeated instead of finishing the sentence. “Meet me outside the Astronomy Tower.”

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Draco hummed cheerfully to himself as he made his way back to the Slytherin common room. A half-blood or Muggleborn student might have recognized the tune, but his pureblood Housemates were unlikely to.

*And wouldn't admit it even if they did.*

Still, he had to admit the main theme from the film they'd watched in Comparative Cultures the day before fit his mood at the moment perfectly.

*Why yes, Princess Luna, I am a little short for a stormtrooper, how kind of you to notice...*

## **Be Careful**

### **37: What You Mean To Kill**

“Wednesday,” said Draco through a mouthful of sausage. “Gets my vote for day of the week with the most unnecessary letters in it.”

“There does seem to be a D going spare,” Ray agreed, serving himself another helping of eggs. “For D-fense! The best class there is!”

“Kiss-up,” said Blaise, peeling the paper off a muffin.

“Am not.”

“Have you ever had the opposite of a Defense class?” Draco inquired. “Actual Dark Arts?”

“No...” Blaise's snort suggested he thought this question was a bit mad.

Draco met the darker boy's eyes and thought deliberately of his classes with Amycus Carrow, of being forced to practice endless variations on spells to cause pain and humiliation, of listening to screams and howls and sobs coming from other students, students he knew and was coming to respect. Whatever expression it brought to his face, it made Blaise flinch back slightly, then drop his gaze to the floor.

“I've seen things I wish I could forget,” Draco said quietly. “Done to Hogwarts students, in Hogwarts classrooms. Defense isn't funny to me. It's something I thought for six years was a waste of time, and something I wish now we had back. Because the alternative is much, much worse.”

The meal finished in silence.

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“Today's topic is one you'll all be familiar with,” said Professor Riddle (to his own surprise, Draco had scored high enough on his Defense exam to enter the advanced class, and had the same section as most of his friends). “Dementors.”

The class shifted and muttered, glancing around at one another.

“Yes, I know. You learn about them from the moment you're old enough to understand. You hear

stories about them every day of your lives. You wear your amulets until you've mastered your Animagus transformation, you do your escape drills, learn to check the wards on your home, get your good memories in line to cast a Patronus. What could there possibly be left to learn?" Professor Riddle's dry tone made several people chuckle, and most of the rest were smiling and nodding in agreement. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, there are a few things I don't believe you yet know. Such as the only two times you can truly kill a dementor."

The room went silent. Then Harry put up his hand.

"Yes, Potter?"

"Sir, I thought..."

"You thought that was impossible?" the Professor finished for him.

Harry nodded. "They're not really alive, so you can't really kill them. Just drive them away with a Patronus, or keep them away with wards. If you can kill them, then why don't we? Why are they still such a problem?"

"Because no one has been sufficiently cold-blooded to make the necessary sacrifices." Professor Riddle leaned back against the edge of his desk. "You see, the moments of a dementor's vulnerability coincide with the times it is most like a truly living creature. Namely, the two ends of its reproductive act." He smiled sardonically, looking around the room at his astonished students. "Yes, that's right. Dementors can reproduce. There are more of them now than there once were, and there may be more in the future. It all depends on us."

"How?" blurted Hermione.

"Do you know what, exactly, a dementor is, Miss..." Professor Riddle stopped. "I beg your pardon. Mrs. Weasley."

The class snickered. Hermione gave them all a Look promising retribution. "I've read about several competing theories, Professor," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind one ear. "Some people call them minor demons, embodiments of evil, so that they reproduce whenever there's more evil in the world than usual. Others believe they're depression made incarnate, and that whenever a person becomes depressed, a new dementor is born. And then there was one paper..."

"Go on," Professor Riddle encouraged when she faltered.

"But I don't see how it could be true, sir. It doesn't make sense."

"Tell us anyway."

Hermione took a deep breath. "The authors claimed that the first dementor was created in a Dark experiment involving humans and lethifolds, and that it got loose and Kissed its creator... and then, later, split in half, giving birth to another thing like itself."

Several girls squealed. Ron, at the back of the room, hissed a half-understandable curse.

“If this theory is true, it would mean that all dementors once were human beings,” Hermione said, her face pale but her voice resolute. “That the souls of those Kissed by dementors become dementors themselves, instead of simply being ‘lost’ as we have believed to this point.” She slapped her open hand down on her desk. “That never made sense to me, the idea that a soul could be lost like a doll or a book, but this is no better!”

“No better, perhaps,” said Professor Riddle, his voice somber. “But research conducted within the last year shows frighteningly conclusive results. Most Defense experts now feel they can say with confidence that this theory, as unpalatable as it may be, is the true one. Every dementor in the world is the remnants of a human soul.”

Students gasped, shuddered, whispered to one another. Couples sought solace in each other's arms, brothers and sisters pressed palms together. Draco folded his hands into his robes, hoping he could get them warm again and keep anyone from seeing how hard they were shaking.

*Besides, concentrating on cold hands keeps me from thinking about how much I'd like to have someone here to comfort me.*

“The only times, therefore, when a dementor is vulnerable enough to destroy are the moments when it is actively in the process of reproducing,” Professor Riddle said when the class was back under some form of control. “Either the moment when it has just Kissed a human being and stolen his or her soul, or the moment when it is giving birth to the new dementor that soul has become. A corporeal Patronus, cast with a special three-word incantation—*Expecto patronum emeritum*—can strike a dementor in one of these two states and not only drive it away but destroy it completely, freeing both souls to whatever destinies they were originally denied.”

Draco had never heard a classroom so silent, not even during one of Dolores Umbridge's “no need to talk” lessons.

*Too bad Yaxley woke up soon enough to stop her being Kissed, the day Potter and company raided the Ministry to steal the locket. Hers is one soul I don't think I'd mind condemning to an eternity of destroying happiness. She did a bang-up job of it at Hogwarts!*

*And, of course, I helped her.* He grimaced. “*I'm a member of the Inquisitorial Squad*”—Merlin's toenails, I sounded like a fool...

After the rest of the lesson, which consisted of practical advice on protecting oneself or a group from dementors if stranded outdoors at night, Draco brought up this particular point in his life to his friends.

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting as a reaction. Uproarious laughter was not it.

When they could breathe again, Ray, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville demonstrated the origins of this particular joke. Draco thought he recognized the style, and a question confirmed that the

sketch had, indeed, been written by the same brilliant madmen responsible for the film traditionally shown on the first day of a Comparative Cultures class at Hogwarts.

“Shame there's no play version of that,” he remarked as the group repacked their bags for their next classes. “It'd be hilarious to see live on stage.”

“Yes, it would, wouldn't it?” said Ginny, exchanging knowing glances with Ray.

Draco groaned. “I've created a monster.”

“Nonsense.” Ginny patted him on the head in a motherly way. “You've given us a marvelous idea for which everyone will, eventually, thank you.”

“And before eventually?”

“We'll all hate you,” said Neville briskly. “But we'll get over it.”

“Eventually.”

“Now you're catching on.”

“Well, I hate you all too, so there,” Draco muttered, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Oh, before I forget, can we meet in the TVP room tomorrow at lunch or sometime? I've got a first draft of a plan worked out for October and I need some help tearing it to pieces.”

“Sure.” “I'll be there.” “Will do.” “See you then,” floated back over shoulders as the friends dispersed.

Draco smiled to himself. *Me, I'm for the library. Find that sketch, copy it out, and then get it recopied by someone else like I've been doing with those notes, only this time I think I want a very special person to write it for me...*

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“What's in it for the wee little ferret, then?” Peeves peered suspiciously over the sheet of parchment at Draco. “Why's he asking Peevesie's help, when he never did before?”

“Call it a momentary lapse of judgment,” Draco said. “In any case, you've got the words now. You can decide for yourself what you want to do with them.”

“Hmm.” The poltergeist flipped upside down and floated near the ceiling, reading over the sheet again. Draco slipped quietly out of the room.

*And just in case he decides what he wants to do is turn me in, any teacher in this school would swear blind Blaise Zabini wrote that out.*

His mind, thus relieved of its burden on that topic, returned to its primary worry of the day: Longbottom, Weasley, and Lovegood, and what was going to happen to them for being caught

raiding Snape's office.

*Everyone's talking as if it's going to be something horrible, but I'm not so sure. Snape looked angry when he found them on the stairs with the sword, but it wasn't the same angry he gets when Longbottom's potions go Fwoopers on him. It looked familiar somehow...*

Draco snapped his fingers in recognition. “Last Christmas,” he said aloud. “When he dragged me out of Slughorn's party by my ear and tried to get me to understand what I was doing. It was like he was angrier at what was happening than he was at me...”

*What side is he on, anyway?*

Not for the first time, Draco wished the TVP were just a bit more flexible. Being able to spy on his own world's Snape would have been an incredible boon. But with the soul-counterpart link the magical device needed to function, the only way they'd have been able to do it would be to enlist the help of the otherworld's version of Snape.

*And he doesn't seem like he helps anybody. Probably kicks a puppy on his way to work every morning just to stay in practice. Why Mum's so taken with him, I don't know. Probably for the same reason he's still obsessing over Harry's mum even though she's been married for twenty years and has five kids with her husband...*

Draco grinned to himself. His discovery of Severus Snape's unrequited love for Lily Evans Potter (always assuming it carried over from one world to the next, but he had a sneaking suspicion that it did) shed new light on a great deal of the Potions Master's conduct over the past six years.

*I never thought to question why he hated Potter so much, I just played along because I hated Potter too, but now I can see it's not really Potter he hates—it's Potter's dad, for stealing the girl he loved right out from under his big greasy nose. Of course, she was a Muggleborn too, that might've had something to do with it...*

Draco shook himself out of thoughts of the distant past and returned to thoughts of the near future. Snape had overridden the Carrows on the matter of the intruders in his office, saying that since it was his office and the sword was school property and therefore under his protection, he should have the final say on what was done to them.

*Of course, by that logic, the whole school's under his protection and he ought to have the final say on everything... but I suppose he can't go around sticking his nose in everywhere. It may be big, but it's not that big.*

The punishment, whatever it might be, had not yet been announced, and Draco was starting to worry. *What if he lets Filch have them? It's funny to hear him talking about thumbscrews and chains and whips when you know it can't really happen, but now it can, and just like Defense getting replaced by Dark Arts, suddenly it's not so funny anymore...*

“Malfoy!”

Draco spun, wand already in his hand. Nott took a step back, holding out his hands to show he was unarmed. “Jumpy much?” he asked.

“I was thinking,” Draco said, tucking his wand away again. “You startled me. What's going on?”

“We've just heard what's to happen to the blood traitors.” Nott grinned. “Snape announced it himself. They get a week of night duty out in the Forest with that great oaf Hagrid, and they're still to go to class and turn in all their work on time, or they get detentions just like anyone else who shirks.”

Draco's grin took no acting at all, though he had to swallow his sigh of relief. An oaf Hagrid might be, and the Forest at night was hardly safe, but at least the three leaders of the DA ran a decent chance of coming home alive in the morning. They'd be exhausted at the end of the week, and have however many detentions they'd racked up to deal with, but Draco's little bag of Painless Potion shards was far from empty.

*And if I do run out, I can just make more. Might have to come up with a new way of delivering them eventually, but for now, shoving it through their skin when I push them down in the hall seems to work just fine...*

Nott was still talking, and Draco realized he'd missed a couple sentences. “Back up the carpet,” he said, holding up a hand. “What was that about going out?”

“We're all going tonight.” Nott assumed an expression he probably thought made him look evil and secretive. To Draco's eyes, it looked like someone had slipped him a double dose of the Weasley twins' U-No-Poo. “Lure Hagrid off, get him to leave them someplace he thinks is safe. Then we'll lay the trail. By the time he gets back, they'll be treed by a couple dozen acromantulas—assuming they haven't fallen and been eaten yet.”

Draco sucked in a breath involuntarily and quickly turned it into a gasp of amazement. “That's brilliant!” he said, then glanced over one shoulder before leaning in. “But you know, they are pureblood. We're going to need them eventually. Granted, there's loads of Weasleys, but just the one girl, and Longbottom and Lovegood are the only ones in their families...”

Nott looked at him sideways. “What's wrong with you, Malfoy? You almost sound like you care about them!”

“I care about our future!” Draco retorted, using anger to mask his fear. *Too close for comfort, that one.* “The future of the wizarding race! Don't you?”

“Nope.” Nott shook his head cheerfully. “I care about my future. And I don't need Divination to see acromantulas there tonight.” He gave Draco a searching look. “Everybody else from our year is in on this, Malfoy. If you don't want to come, at least don't spoil it for the rest of us by going and telling.”

Draco considered this for a moment. “Fine,” he said at last. “I won't tell. But I'm not coming,

either.” He put on his best haughty look. “I need my beauty sleep, you know. A problem you're obviously unfamiliar with.”

“Bugger off.” Nott shoved Draco's shoulder, hard. “Have a nice time sleeping. We'll wake you when we get in and tell you how it went.” The weedy boy grinned suddenly. “Bet you a Galleon they drain Longbottom dry in under two minutes.”

“That's disgusting.” Draco pushed past his Housemate. “And I have homework to do, even if you don't. Excuse me.”

*Homework, oh, that it is. He stalked down the hallway, intent on getting to his dorm and privacy. But not the sort you think. I need to find a potion that will make it dead obvious where you nine are, without leaving any trace when I slip it into your pumpkin juice at dinner tonight...*

*Draco growled under his breath. Tight-arse little bumkissers, all of you. Planning on murdering three people just because you think it'll get you in good with the people in charge.*

The titles he was so lovingly bestowing on his Housemates mixed themselves up with his need for a locator, and all at once Draco knew what he was going to be brewing tonight.

*Perfect. It's quick, it's easy, it dissolves right away and doesn't leave any taste behind...*

*Only trouble is, there's about a one in ten chance it won't take. Which doesn't give me very good odds at getting all of them.*

*No help for it. I'm going to have to go out there myself. Make sure Hagrid doesn't leave those three for a second.*

*But I can't go like this. They'll hex me before I can get a word out of my mouth.*

He put a hand to his chest and smiled to feel the half-familiar shape hanging under his robes.

*Good thing I don't have to...*

## Be Careful

### 38: What Help You Find

Draco turned off the fire under his cauldron and sniffed the steam warily. Too much and he'd start to feel the potion's effects himself.

*All right, it's done. Now to find a way to sneak it to them.*

He started to pace up and down the room, thinking. Spiking all the drinks of the other Slytherin seventh years himself was theoretically possible, but would be hard to get away with. One person's goblet could be casually passed over with a hand—more than two or three started to get suspicious.

*I could put it in the pitcher, I suppose. But there's no guarantee they'll all drink from the one I dose, or that any of them will, for that matter.*

*I wish there were a way to dose the whole of Slytherin House at once... get it into everything we drink tonight, all at the same time...*

Draco stopped in midstride. “That's it!”

Within thirty seconds, he had decanted the potion, cleaned up, and was on his way out of the dungeons, bound for a certain ground floor corridor.

*What was it Lucius always used to tell me? “Never do anything for yourself that you can make the house-elf do for you...”*

*Which brings up its own particular problem.*

*The house-elf in question is here. And likely still bearing a grudge.*

“The question is,” Draco muttered aloud as he approached the painting of the bowl of fruit, “can I get him to believe I'm on the same side he is now? He hero-worships Potter, if I can work through that...” He snorted. “Who'm I kidding? He's more likely to throw me down the stairs like he did Lucius, and if I'm being honest I probably deserve it...”

A noise as of a door opening and voices beyond alerted him to a pair of Hufflepuffs emerging from their dormitory farther up the hall. Quickly, he tickled the pear and pulled open the painting, darting inside the kitchens before the Hufflepuffs could see anything other than the back of his

robes and bag.

*Note to self: Talking aloud when there's no one else around is a bad thing.*

As he shut the portrait door, the hair on the back of Draco's neck stood up. Someone was looking at him.

*More likely a whole lot of someones. Small, wrinkly, funny-colored someones.*

*But no, they've got work to do. They wouldn't stop it just because a student came in, not for this long.*

*Which means the most likely culprit here is...*

He turned around.

The creature standing behind him, arms crossed over its maroon-covered chest and huge green eyes narrowed in suspicion, had once been as familiar a sight to Draco as his own parents, though then the house-elf had worn only a ripped pillowcase and cringed at the sight of any of the Malfoys. In the face of this blatant hostility, Draco felt like doing a bit of cringing himself, but opted for a low-key approach.

“Afternoon, Dobby,” he said, sitting down on the floor cross-legged as he'd seen Ray do in the nursery at the other Hogwarts, to bring himself more on a level with the people who inhabited it.

Dobby glared at him. “Draco Malfoy does not belong in Hogwarts kitchens,” he said in a tone of surprising menace for such a squeaky voice.

“Why not?” Draco heard himself say, and winced inwardly. *I believe this is known as digging one's own grave...*

“Draco Malfoy is not to order any of these nice elves to do mean things to Gryffindors,” Dobby hissed, coming a few steps closer. “Or to Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs who are following the Gryffindors. Dobby will stop him if he tries, because Dobby is a free elf and not bound to do as Hogwarts students say. And no elf is giving away any of the secrets the Gryffindors are asking them to keep.” He lifted his long nose into the air. “So Draco Malfoy can be taking himself back out that door and not be coming here again.”

*Got a big attitude for a little elf, don't you?*

Draco managed to keep from saying this aloud by envisioning Lucius tumbling down the stairs. *He may have a big attitude, but he's got the power to back it up. And wizard's magic can't always counter house-elf. Careful what you say, Draco...*

“I notice there's a House you didn't name,” he said after a few seconds' consideration. “You willing to help me do something to them?”

Dobby blinked once or twice. This was more impressive on a house-elf than on a human. “Draco Malfoy is wanting to... to trick other Slytherins?” he said finally.

“That's right.”

The suspicion was back in Dobby's face full force. “And why is Draco Malfoy wanting to—”

“Would you stop it with my name already?” Draco snapped. “I know who I am, so do you, and reminding me isn't going to change anything!”

The house-elf snorted once. “Dobby sees Draco Malfoy has not changed at all,” he said, folding his arms again. “Always getting angry at little things and thinking he is boss of all the world.”

Draco closed his eyes and recited the first two stanzas of the pirates' opening song to himself. *Yelling at him won't solve anything; it's what he expects. If I want his help, I have to prove to him I'm not who I used to be.*

“Maybe you're right,” he said when he could open his eyes again. Dobby was watching him sidelong now. “Maybe I haven't changed since you knew me. But I'm trying to change. I...” *Just say it, Draco, get it over with.* “I'm sorry. For the way I used to treat you. I was a kid, I'd never been taught any better, but neither of those is really an excuse for the stuff I used to think was funny to see you doing.” A few particularly painful memories surfaced, and it took no acting skills at all to produce a wince. “I've stopped thinking it's funny to see other people hurting since I found out what it feels like from the other side.”

Dobby took a step back in shock, tripped over the hanging end of his long hand-knitted scarf, and fell flat on his behind. Draco looked away, trying to avoid the temptation to laugh, and discovered that every other house-elf in the kitchens was staring at him bug-eyed. This, too, was decidedly more intimidating than a similar array of human beings would have been.

*Wonder what Dobby's been telling them.*

*Probably no more than the truth. That'd be bad enough.*

The house-elves towards the left of the kitchen parted to allow one of their number through. He wore a locket on a chain around his neck, and the towel tied around his waist was plain white rather than bearing the Hogwarts shield as the other elves' did. Draco recognized him at once; he looked rather more like his counterpart from the other world than he had the last time they'd met in the flesh.

*I'd wondered what had happened to him when Potter and the others had to run for it...*

“Hello, Kreacher,” he said, glancing back at Dobby, who didn't seem to be making much progress getting up. “Think you could give us a hand over here? Dobby may need some help.”

“You are not Kreacher's master now,” Kreacher stated firmly.

“Which is why it was a request, not an order.” Draco thought back over what he'd seen of the summer months at Grimmauld Place. “That's how Potter does things, isn't it? And Weasley, and Granger? They ask you to do things, not just order you around?”

Kreacher gave a slow, reluctant nod.

“They're all right, by the way,” Draco added. “They got away safely.”

“Kreacher wishes he could believe that,” the old house-elf croaked. “But Kreacher has watched Draco Malfoy and knows his ways. Kreacher knows Draco Malfoy is no friend to Harry Potter.”

Draco spread his hands. “Maybe I won't be on his Christmas card list this year, but I'm trying to do something that will help him, even if he doesn't know about it. Did he ever mention Ginny Weasley to you? Ron Weasley's sister?”

Again, Kreacher nodded, doubt beginning to creep into his eyes.

“I has seen them together sometimes,” Dobby volunteered unexpectedly, getting back to his feet unaided. “They looks...” He sighed. “Harry Potter is not happy much this last year. With the Wheezy's sister, he was being happy.”

Draco thought he ought to have got a medal for not reacting outwardly to this name for the tallest portion of Potter's trio. “How about Luna Lovegood, or Neville Longbottom?” he said instead. “He ever talk about them?”

“With worry,” said Kreacher, starting across the floor towards Draco and Dobby, his eyes fixed disconcertingly on Draco. “With hope that they is safe here at Hogwarts.”

“Yeah, well, if you've noticed what's going on upstairs, you know they're not particularly safe.” Draco upended his schoolbag and slid the stoppered flask of potion towards the two house-elves, who were now standing side by side, watching him. “Which is why I'd be very much obliged if you could put a little of that in all the drinks that go up to the Slytherin table tonight. Not an order. A favor. For me, for them, and for Potter. Because I don't think he'd care to come back to Hogwarts and find his girlfriend's been eaten by giant spiders.”

Dobby picked up the flask, pulled out the stopper between two long fingers, and sniffed cautiously at the contents. His eyes went wider than usual, and he handed the flask to Kreacher. Kreacher took a sniff of his own and began to laugh in a voice like a rusty gate hinge. “You wants my master's friends to... hear the Slytherins coming?” he asked Draco between bouts of laughter.

“That was the general idea.”

Kreacher slid the stopper back into the flask decisively. “Kreacher will do this. For his master. Not for you,” he added to Draco.

Draco shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Carrying the flask carefully in both hands, Kreacher returned to the other side of the kitchen, leaving Draco alone with Dobby, who was still looking piercingly at him. “Dobby was here already before the door opened,” the house-elf volunteered after a moment. “He heard you speaking. Speaking about what Dobby once did to Lucius Malfoy.” His lip curled back as he pronounced the name. “Dobby would do it again if he got the chance—”

“I'd love to see you do it.” Draco contemplated the thought of his so-called father soaring down a flight of stairs and found it good. “Maybe we can arrange that sometime.”

Dobby stopped short and treated Draco to an incredulous stare, house-elf style. “I takes back what I is saying before,” he said after a few moments. “You is not the same little master Dobby used to know. Not even the same boy Dobby followed last year for Harry Potter.”

“Oh, is that how he finally caught me out. I'd wondered.” Draco leaned back against the door. “You're right, Dobby, I'm not the same as I was. There are days I wake up and wonder just exactly who I am. I'm sort of working it out as I go. But I know now what I'm not, what I never want to be, and that's a place to start, at least.” He looked down into round green eyes. “Can we call it quits on the past? It was wrong, I'm ashamed of myself for it, but there's no way to change it now.”

Dobby rocked back and forth on his feet. “You is really trying to help Harry Potter's friends?” he asked, twisting his scarf between his hands. “Dobby has wanted to help them, but Dobby worries that the new Headmaster does not approve of helping them...”

“I thought you were a free elf,” Draco said, raising an eyebrow. “Not bound to do what anyone said.”

“Not students,” Dobby corrected. “Dobby has a contract with...” He trailed off, and Draco saw a light dawning in his eyes. “Dobby had a contract. With Professor Dumbledore. But Dobby is not sure if his contract is still valid with the new Headmaster...”

“Which would make you a free agent,” said Draco idly. “And of course Kreacher belongs to Potter now, he's not bound to the school at all, he's just here to hide out. Wouldn't it be interesting if you two trailed Potter's friends and just, oh, misdirected a few of the unfriendly spells that went their way? Right onto any Slytherins who happened to be nearby?”

Dobby grinned.

Draco had never noticed quite how pointed house-elf teeth were before.

## **Be Careful**

### **39: Where You Watch**

By the time he made it to dinner, Draco was beginning to think he'd taken a bigger step than he knew.

*The house-elves go everywhere, see everything. And the ones who serve Hogwarts are loyal to whoever's Headmaster at the moment, so they can't directly intervene as long as Snape sanctions what's happening, but that won't stop them from dropping a few words in Dobby's or Kreacher's ear...*

“Short help is better than no help at all,” he murmured, shoving past Terry Boot and Michael Corner, who were standing in the doorway to the Great Hall talking heatedly about something. “You take special lessons in door-blocking up there in Featherhead Territory, or does it come naturally?” he added loudly over his shoulder.

“Piss off, Malfoy,” Corner snapped back. Boot gave Draco an odd look, then shook his head and returned to his conversation with Corner.

*Whatever. I want my dinner.*

Draco headed for the Slytherin table. As he took his seat, he felt a tap against his shin. He glanced down long enough to see Dobby, crouching under the table, and nodded ever so slightly to tell the elf he'd been noticed. An instant later, Dobby was gone, and a goblet materialized on the table next to Draco, already filled with pumpkin juice.

*The unalloyed sort. Being offensive to the people I'm trying to help would be a bit counterproductive.*

He took a small sip and watched as Nott and Zabini elbowed each other out of the way to get first dibs on the new pitcher which had just showed up.

*Enjoy that, why don't you. And everything that comes with it.*

Tonight was going to be fun.

---

Luna tucked a scarf into her pocket. It might be only September, but it was going to be cold being

out in the Forest all night long, and she'd need to stay warm if she didn't want to get sick. Going without sleep for a week would make her easy prey for all sorts of diseases, both the ones Madam Pomfrey could help deal with and the ones she didn't understand about.

*If I were to catch Fortensimo, I'd be thrashing about and shouting at the top of my lungs every few hours, awake or asleep, and no one would like that, whether I were here in the castle or out in the Forest. And the only way to cure it is a bowl of Daddy's Freshwater Plimpy soup, and Madam Pomfrey doesn't have the recipe for that.*

Still, she was less uneasy about these detentions than either Neville or Ginny seemed to be. They would be with Hagrid, after all. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to them.

*And I had another dream last night, and my dream-friend told me to expect help to come from an unexpected place...*

Luna slid mittens and a hat into her other pocket, then added a pair for Ginny in case her friend forgot her own.

Tonight was going to be an adventure.

---

Neville fastened his outdoor cloak, trying not to look at the empty, dusty beds where Harry, Ron, and Dean usually slept.

*Is mine going to look like that after a week of not using it? Or after two weeks, or four, or eight, if I don't come back tonight?*

He shook off the thoughts. He'd been out in the Forest at night before and come back alive. Hagrid and Fang had been there, as they would tonight, but instead of Harry and Hermione, he was going with Ginny and Luna, and this time there was no fourth person involved in the detentions...

*That's one good thing about tonight. Malfoy won't be there.*

His spirits buoyed by the thought, Neville finished dressing and headed down the boys' stairs to collect Ginny and meet Luna in the entrance hall.

Tonight would be tough, but he'd make it through.

---

Following Neville and Luna towards the Forest, Ginny hunched down within her cloak, wishing she had one like Harry's that would make it possible for her to disappear.

*I hate myself. I hate the world. Why don't I just walk away once we're in the Forest and let something eat me? The way I'm feeling, I'll give it terrible indigestion, and serve it right...*

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she recognized that she was in a bad mood and didn't really

mean what she was thinking, but the thoughts continued unabated.

*I pushed Neville into this, and Luna only came along because she thought we knew what we were doing. How could I have been so stupid as to think we could get away with stealing the sword? How could any of us have been so stupid as to trust that password Malfoy gave Luna? He probably heard us talking and told Snape what we'd said, and they set up a special password that would let Snape know the instant we got into his office...*

And now that they'd been caught, the sword had been sent to Gringotts, probably locked in a high-security vault belonging to a Death Eater. Harry's best chance of doing whatever Dumbledore had intended him to do with it was gone.

*We're dead. We're all dead. It doesn't matter if we live another few days or weeks or months or whatever, they're just playing with us, waiting for us to fight back so they can claim they had no choice but to kill us.*

*Or else—*

Ginny's mind tried to shy away from the 'or else' in this case. She growled under her breath and forced herself to finish the thought.

*Or else what Malfoy said to Luna in the hallway will come true. They'll still wait for us to fight back, but we're all three of us pureblood and they won't want us dead, so instead of killing us or sending us to Azkaban, they'll marry us off to purebloods they trust to keep us in line...*

Her mind presented her with vivid images of what that keeping in line would involve, and she shuddered deeply. *No. Never. I'll kill myself first. Or better, kill him—whichever him it happens to be—and then myself.*

*I hope it's Malfoy. That would make it all worthwhile.*

A hand touched her arm. She jumped before recognizing Luna. "You look worried," her friend said, handing her a pair of knitted mittens. "What are you thinking about?"

"Things that will probably never happen." Ginny shook her head hard, trying to rise out of her momentary depression. "Luna, Neville, I'm sorry. This is my fault. You shouldn't have listened to me."

"Don't be silly," said Luna, draping a scarf around Ginny's neck. "It was a good idea. We just had some bad luck when Snape came back too soon."

"They're after us anyway, Ginny," Neville added from in front of them, turning to look at the girls. "We might as well try to earn what we're going to get."

Ginny laughed. "Now you sound like Fred and George."

"That's possibly the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Hagrid loomed out of the darkness, Fang trotting at his heels. "Share the joke, will yeh?" he said, handing Neville one of the two lanterns he was carrying. "Not been much ter laugh about lately..."

Before anyone could begin to tell him what they were all laughing about, Fang barked excitedly and took off running.

"FANG!" Hagrid bellowed. "Get back here!"

There was a panicked screech, and a grey streak of fur shot into the circle of light shed by the lanterns, straight towards Luna, who hastily dropped to one knee and caught it. Fang bounded back into the light and looked up at the small animal Luna was now cradling, whining hopefully.

"Stop that," Hagrid ordered his dog, bopping the boarhound on the head with one great hand. "What's this, then?"

"I don't know." Luna stroked the back of the little creature's head until it turned to sniff at her finger. "It's cute, though." She glanced at the animal's other end. "He's cute."

"Looks a bit like a ferret," said Ginny, grinning at Neville, who returned the expression.

"I don' think so," said Hagrid, peering at the animal closely. "Set him down fer a secon', Luna? I've got Fang, he won' get loose."

Luna tipped the creature out of her arms. It tumbled to the grass and let out an outraged chittering noise, flowing back up and standing on its hind legs to scold at her. She laughed, as did Neville and Ginny.

"Mongoose," said Hagrid with certainty. "Odd ter see one here—they live halfway 'round th' world, an' they're Muggle creatures ter boot—but he seems friendly. Funny color fur he's got, though..."

"Maybe a wizard adopted him as a pet and changed his fur to this color," Neville suggested. "And then he got away while his owner was staying in Hogsmeade."

"Wherever he came from, he seems to like you, Luna," said Ginny, bending to let the mongoose sniff at her fingers. "Are you going to keep him?"

"I think I will." Luna patted her shoulder, and the mongoose clambered up her arm and settled himself around her neck, creating an effect not unlike a fur collar to her robes. "As long as he'll stay with me, that is. He's his own creature. I won't try to keep him anywhere he's not happy."

"Wish more people felt like that," said Hagrid, releasing Fang, who sneezed and shook as though climbing out of the lake. "Come on, then, let's get goin', got a long night ahead."

Ginny glanced over her shoulder as she followed. Luna was stroking the mongoose's head and humming to herself, smiling as if she knew a secret. "What is it?" Ginny asked, dropping back a

pace to walk beside her friend.

“Do you know what mongooses are famous for?”

Ginny shook her head. “What?”

“Fighting snakes.” Luna scratched behind one of the mongoose's ears, and it rubbed its cheek against her finger in response. “Especially poisonous ones, the ones no other animal will attack.”

“Oh, really?” Ginny took a closer look at the lithe little creature. “Think you could give us some pointers?” she asked it, and smiled when it chattered as if in response.

“Maybe it's a sign,” Neville said, bringing up the rear with the lantern. “An omen, like the Grim or a flock of magpies. To tell us not to give up.”

Ginny nodded. Her earlier imaginings, though still frightening, seemed less possible now than they had a few minutes ago.

*We've had one thing go wrong. That doesn't mean we should never try anything else.*

*Harry's still out there. Still fighting. I'll do my part to give him something to come back to.*

Lifting her shoulders, she followed Hagrid into the Forest.

Tonight might not be so bad after all.

---

Draco snuggled down against Luna's neck and let himself drowse. Hagrid was saying something he couldn't quite make out, and it occurred to him that he hadn't yet seen the gamekeeper in the other world. *Wonder what happened to him? Did he die in the Troubles like Neville's dad, or does he have some other job these days?*

“Oh, Hagrid!” Weasley exclaimed, her voice bringing Draco back to full awareness. “You shouldn't have!”

Draco lifted his head and peered ahead. Longbottom was just setting his lantern into a holder at the edge of a clearing, across from one that was already holding the lantern Hagrid had been carrying. The half-giant himself was kneeling beside a stone-lined pit, adding sticks to the fire burning there. Four sleeping bags, one significantly larger than the other three, lay around the pit, and a picnic basket was set off to one side.

“They said keep yeh out in the Forest all night, an' that's what I intend ter do,” Hagrid said gruffly. “We'll take it in turns keepin' watch, that oughter make yeh look sleepy enough tomorrow ter satisfy 'em.”

Draco dug his claws into Luna's robes as she ran across the clearing to embrace Hagrid, Weasley a few steps ahead of her. “You're a true friend, Hagrid,” the red-haired girl said, smiling up at the

blushing gamekeeper. "Thank you."

"Least I kin do, y'know?" Hagrid mumbled, hugging both girls at once. "Long's no one catches us, you'll make it through th' week."

From somewhere out in the Forest came a sound like ripping cloth.

"The lights!" Weasley hissed. "Put them out, quick, someone's coming!"

Longbottom doused the fire with his wand before aiming it at one of the lanterns. Weasley snuffed the other one with an expert spell. Hagrid got to his feet, the vague shape of his large pink umbrella in his hand.

*I'm not sure I want to know what he's going to do with that.* Draco peered towards the sound, which was coming from the area they'd traveled through to get to this spot. *But I do think I know what that was...*

The noise was repeated, louder this time. Then several small bursts came together.

"Ugh," said Longbottom, backing up a pace. "Hagrid, I think we need to get upwind of whatever that is."

Weasley sniffed twice, then coughed. "Seconded," she said.

Luna pinched her own nose shut and began to move. "I hope you're all right," she murmured to Draco. "I know animals have a more sensitive sense of smell than humans do, but I don't want to use a spell on you, because I might hurt you..."

Draco rubbed his nose against her jaw. *Don't worry about me,* he chattered. *I came prepared.*

"Well, that's good." Luna stroked the top of his head with a finger.

The bursts of sound were coming thick and fast now. Longbottom and Weasley lit their wands, and Luna pulled hers out and lit it as well.

"Here now," said Hagrid, striding to the fore as they came through the last few trees to the source of the noise. "What's all this?"

Nine seventh years were leaning on trees or doubled over on the ground, groaning. Every few seconds, one or another of them would produce again the sound that had first given away their presence. Their school ties were uniformly green and silver, and several of them looked up in panic at Hagrid's voice.

"It looks like most of the Slytherins in my year, Professor," said Longbottom, peering at the other students. "Were you supposed to take someone else out for detention tonight?"

"No, they just wanted to come and guard us," Luna said, still stroking Draco's head. "To be sure

nothing bad happened to us.”

“It would be such a terrible loss to the school if we got hurt,” Weasley added, her eyes fixed on Zabini, who was clutching at his stomach and moaning.

“Yer in no condition ter be out here,” said Hagrid severely, though Draco could see his beard twitching with amusement in the wandlight. “Back ter the castle, all o’ yeh. I’ll be speakin’ ter Professor Slughorn in the mornin’.”

The Slytherins helped each other up and started stumbling out of the clearing. Hagrid's cough halted them. “Yeh migh’ want ter try that way,” he said, pointing off at right angles to the way they'd been going.

When the last cloak was out of sight and the last noise had faded, Weasley stepped forward into the clearing, her wand raised. “Scourgificus aetheris,” she said, waving it in a circle.

“Thank you, Ginny,” Luna said, taking her fingers away from her nostrils. “That would have been horrid to sleep next to all night. I'd have been sure to dream of Strunks and trolls.”

“Yeh said most o’ the Slytherins, Neville?” asked Hagrid as they made their way back to the campsite. “Who was missin’?”

“You won't believe this, but it was Malfoy.”

Hagrid snorted. “Yer right. I don’ believe it.”

“Don't be prejudiced,” said Luna, relighting one of the lanterns with a tap of her wand. “Just because Malfoy used to be bad, doesn't mean he still is. Maybe he's the one who gave the Slytherins the potion that made them do that.”

“And maybe I'm going to marry a relative of the Lestranges,” Longbottom said, igniting the fire once more. “How are we splitting the watches?”

Timetable set—Weasley would start the night, Longbottom would take second watch, Hagrid third, and Luna the last—the four sat down to eat the food Hagrid had brought from his cabin and bat around ideas about who could have dosed the Slytherins, and with what.

*I could tell you who, but you've already said you wouldn't believe it. Draco accepted a tidbit of rock cake from Luna. But you're right about what it was, Longbottom. Good old Flatulence Formula. I'm surprised your brothers haven't tried marketing it yet, Weasley...*

Fortified by a strong mug of tea, Weasley took up her post at the corner of the camp. Hagrid doused the fire and rolled up in his sleeping bag, and Longbottom and Luna did the same. Draco found a comfortable spot against Luna's left shoulder and settled in.

“Good night,” Luna whispered to him, stroking once more behind his ear.

Good night, Draco chittered back to her, resting his nose on her neck. *Pleasant dreams.*

“You too.”

---

Ginny had no idea why she kept glancing back at her sleeping friends. Any threat to them would come from outside, not in. Unless Luna's little mongoose was something else, but surely Hagrid would have noticed...

*Enough. Pay attention to the Forest. That's got plenty of creatures that could kill you all on its own without you making up more.*

She faced resolutely outwards and began to walk the perimeter of the campsite, scanning all around for possible dangers.

Behind her, silently, Luna and the mongoose vanished.

## **Be Careful**

### **40: Who You Bring Along**

Draco roused slowly to the feeling of warmth on his face. He had a feeling he'd overslept, though he couldn't understand how, as the position he was in didn't seem as though it would be comfortable for long periods of time.

*Smells good, though. That charm on my nose must have worn off.*

He laughed at the thought of the charm, and why he'd used it. The sound came out as a soft *ch-ch-ch-ch-ch*.

*What in—I'm still transfigured?*

One eye opened and scanned down his body.

*Long, grey, and furry. Still transfigured.*

The soft, sweet-smelling expanse below him shifted to accommodate his movement, and a sigh came from it. Draco yipped in surprise and nearly jumped clear before getting himself under control. *It's all right, stupid, it's just Luna—you fell asleep curled up with her, why are you surprised she's still here?*

He lifted his head to have a better look around.

Weasley, Longbottom, and Hagrid were gone, along with the two lantern-holders at the corners of the campsite. The pit in the center was filled with leaves, and the sun was high overhead, one beam lancing down to shine on his face.

*This doesn't make sense. Why didn't anyone wake her for her watch? Why did they leave without her? Why does this place look like—*

Draco smacked himself on his furry forehead with one little mongoose paw.

*Idiot. How, exactly, did I forget what happens to me when I go to sleep? It's only been the most important thing in my life for the last two and a half months! But no, I went traipsing blithely off into the woods and curled up with a pretty little girl, and now I'm going to have to change back and explain to her how she accidentally got transported into another world!*

He squinted up at the sun. *Not to mention, I'm late for Charms. "Sorry, Professor Flitwick, I turned into an animal and overslept out in the Forest with a girl who hates me—"*

*Except she doesn't.* Draco carefully slid to the ground beside Luna, who pulled the top flap of her sleeping bag up to cover where he'd been without waking. *Longbottom and Weasley still think I'm scum, and I can't blame them, but Luna seems to be looking at me differently these days...*

He shook his head and carefully thought the countercharm to the transfiguration spell on his amulet. A moment later, he was human again, crouching beside Luna's sleeping bag.

*Differently or not, this isn't a conversation I'm looking forward to having—*

*So why should I?*

He drew his wand and murmured the strongest Sleeping Charm he knew. Luna twitched as it took effect, then nestled down farther into her sleeping bag and was still.

"There," Draco said aloud, standing up with a wince. His back was sore after sleeping on Luna's neck all night long. "If I'm lucky, it'll last all day, and then I just need to come back here tonight—Disillusioned, of course, they'd hex me as soon as they saw me on the other side if I weren't—and take her back with me..."

*And now I know I can take people along when I change worlds. I didn't before. Not that I'd inflict that world on anyone here, but I might want to try to salvage someone from there. Maybe Mother... though I don't know how well she'd get along with Mum, or what she'd do with herself here...*

Dismissing the thoughts, Draco set a few Safety Charms around Luna, then put his wand away and started for the castle. He'd explain what was going on to his Head of House and the man's wife—Professors Riddle and McGonagall were equal to almost anything, and what they couldn't handle, Headmaster Dumbledore surely could...

*And only a bit of that would make sense to anyone from the other side. The rest would be gibberish. Either that or heresy.*

He laughed aloud, recalling the night before. *Longbottom was making fun of Luna—or no, just trying to tell her how wrong he thought she was—but anyway, he claimed if she was right about me, he'd marry a relative of the Lestranges. Well, maybe you won't, Longbottom, but Neville certainly seems to be looking at Meghan Black that certain way, and she's my dear Auntie Bella's first cousin once removed...*

A far older memory swept over him. He was quite small, about Dragon Charlie's age, and climbing out of a Gringotts cart with his mother, wincing away from the noise as a goblin shook a metal instrument towards a dragon, which cowered back down the passage—another goblin laid his palm against the wood of a nearby door, which melted away, revealing what looked to Draco's five-year-old eyes like all the Galleons in the world, and an entire wall covered with silver suits of

armor and jeweled helmets and golden goblets—

“Yes!” Draco shouted, startling a treeful of birds into flight. “That's it!”

He picked up his pace to a run. His plan for the eighteenth of October had just had a new wrinkle added to it.

*Now I understand why Abby said I needed to know where the cup was before then...*

---

“What is he doing in the Forest?” Hermione demanded, peering over Harry's and Ray's shoulders at the Marauder's Map.

“Leaving,” said Ron, pointing at Draco's dot, which was moving rapidly towards the castle. “But he wasn't alone—” He stopped and looked up. “Huh. That's strange.”

Hermione followed Ron's gaze to Luna. She was taking advantage of their morning break to discuss the life cycle of a nargle with Professor Kettleburn, who'd taken over his father's position when the elder man retired to preserve his one-and-a-half remaining natural limbs. *I can understand that—even a magical prosthesis isn't ever the same as what it's replacing, though they can come surprisingly close...*

Then she looked back at the Map, at the spot Ray was pointing to.

“Oh my,” she said.

“Maybe we should go out and meet him.” Harry folded up the Map. “See what he's got himself into this time.”

“That's one thing I like about having Draco Malfoy around,” said Ginny, following her fiancé. “Life is never dull.”

“Occasionally insane,” Neville said, holding the door for everyone. “But never dull.”

---

Luna watched them go, smiling to herself. Professor Kettleburn was trying to find a polite way to tell her that he didn't think nargles existed. She had known that about him, but talking to him about them served as a useful cover for what she was really doing.

*I will have to tell Draco sometime about another piece to his ideas about parents and upbringing—two counterparts who had the same mother, a lady who was courted by a pair of half-brothers, and in each world a different one succeeded...*

---

Professor Riddle proved more than willing to lay a few Safety Charms of his own around the spot in the Forest where Luna was sleeping, Professor Flitwick waived the usual detention for missing

class with the proviso that Draco have the day's work done by their next meeting, and there was just enough of morning break left for Draco to tell his friends the realization he'd had in the Forest.

"It's the Lestrangle vault," he said, tapping the sketch Luna had made of the scene Professor Riddle had showed them, Helga Hufflepuff's cup reposing between an emerald-studded helmet and a flask of potion, its glass etched in patterns that had been filled with gold. "Mother took me there once when I was young; I think there'd been an attempted robbery and she wanted to see for herself that her sister's treasure was all safe. Mind you, I'm not sure how she'd have noticed anything missing in that rat's nest..."

"That's great," said Harry, "but I'm still not getting why it was so important for you to know this now. What's it have to do with Ron walking out on me and Neenie? And don't even start," he added over his shoulder. "You know I mean the other one."

"I wasn't going to say anything," Ron protested.

"Just making sure..." Harry's voice was almost drowned out by the warning bell for the second morning class.

"Tell us at lunch, Draco," said Hermione as the group grabbed bags and headed for various doors and stairwells. "Meet in the TVP room, everyone? We can have the house-elves bring something up."

"Sounds good." "I'll be there." "Got it."

---

"What it has to do with Weasley walking out," said Draco between bites of sandwich, "is that I'm planning to be there. To grab him and take him back to the Manor with me."

"What?" said several people at once.

"No, hear me out!" Draco held up his free hand. "I did some experimenting over the summer, and now that I've bonded with the Manor-core, I can make things move in the house and on the grounds. Doors, windows, furniture—even the actual grounds themselves, the dirt will get out of the way if I tell it to, all the way to our boundaries—are you starting to see what I'm getting at?"

"Maybe," said Ray. "Go on."

"The Dark Lord kidnapped Ollivander nearly a year ago, he's been torturing him ever since, I'm not sure what he's after..." Draco shook his head. "Never mind. The point is, Ollivander's weak enough he'd never get away from there on his own, even if I gave him a tunnel right out of the cellar they're keeping him in. But with someone helping him, they could both escape."

"And you're going to make the other me the someone," said Ron, then frowned. "But wait, isn't he supposed to be home sick?"

“That's right!” Ginny exclaimed. “No one knows Ron is with Harry, they all think he's home with spattergroit—you can't bring him in, Draco, they'll go after our family, we won't be able to get into hiding in time unless you warn us, and even then there's the other me to think about, I don't think she could get away from Hogwarts in time...”

“Hold on a second,” said Harry. “What do they know, or think they know? Who's missing?”

“Just you and Hermione.” Draco set down his sandwich in favor of a slice of apple. “Why?”

“Well, you can't exactly bring me in. That'd get them way too excited, and suspicious, too, because you've never beaten the other me in a duel, right?”

Draco winced. “Do you have to bring it up?”

“Sorry, just thinking. But it's right, isn't it?”

“Yeah, it's right.”

“So it can't be Ron you ‘heroically capture’, and it can't be me.” Harry bit a crisp in half. “That only leaves one person it can be.”

“I hate to point this out, Harry,” said Ginny, “but she's not the one Abby saw leaving.”

“That's easy to fix,” said Luna. “Draco's good with a cauldron.” Her smile seemed to linger a moment longer than it should have. “There's just enough time, too. And he can do the brewing here and take it back with him so no one suspects, now that he knows he can bring things back and forth that are bigger than just a bit of parchment or a wand.”

“I'm still missing a connection here,” said Ray.

“You won't need to worry about redosing,” Luna added to Draco. “They won't want to question her right away, because they'll want him to be there for it, so they'll put her in the cellar with Mr. Ollivander—only by the time he gets back...” She giggled. “I see why Abby said it was funny. It really is.”

Meghan began to giggle as well, looking from Ron to Hermione. A moment later, Ginny and Harry both laughed. Neville scrunched up his face. “Merlin's wand, Luna,” he complained, “I didn't need to think about that.”

---

“Don't you have a free period now, Draco?” Luna asked as the group finished lunch.

“Yeah, why?”

“I have one too, and I was hoping to try over a duet I taught you the first night you came in your spirit form. Do you remember?”

“Which? The first one, about dangerous games?”

Luna smiled. “Yes, that one. I've always liked it, and it seems very fitting for me to sing it with you instead of with Ray.”

“Why—oh, right.” The duet in question came from a show about a man with a dual personality, one good, the other evil. “Just as long as you don't think I'm out to murder you.”

“No, that's Nev...” Luna stopped. “Never mind me,” she finished after a moment. “Will you come? Pretty please?”

“You're certainly as pretty as Abby, so I don't see how I can say no.” Draco shouldered his bag. “Which way?”

The room to which Luna led him was larger than the practice room in which he'd learned the song, but windowless as that cubbyhole had been, and a piano stood in the corner here as well. Luna took out a book of music from her bag, opened it to the song she wanted, and placed it on the piano's music stand, then tapped her wand three times against the corner of the piano. “It won't have the spirit that a real player would give to it,” she said, coming to the center of the room. “But it will accompany us well enough. Tell me when you're ready.”

Draco took up a place a few paces behind Luna and reached towards her, letting his fingertips just touch her soft skin at the juncture of shoulder and neck. A thrill ran down his arm as they made contact, and he had to swallow before he could say, “Ready.”

Luna began to sing. Within a few words, Draco knew this had been a mistake.

*She's beautiful, she's talented, I'm attracted to her, we are alone together, and she's singing about how dangerous I am to her. Is she more right than she knows?*

Firmly controlling his desires, he entered the song on his cue, answering her desperation with mockery. His character, after all, was evil.

*And I don't know how much longer I can be good with temptation like this...*

---

In the Forest, Luna slept soundly. A faint smile lingered on her lips.

It was always good to give one's friends chances to know each other better before they got involved.

## Be Careful 41: What You Pretend

Luna roused to Hagrid's hand on her shoulder, shaking her gently. "I'm awake," she whispered. "And I've had such a lovely dream."

"Have yeh, now?" Hagrid took her arm to help her get to her feet. Hastily, Luna wiggled her shoulder, sliding away the weight she could feel on it, just in time as Hagrid lifted and she rose into the air. "What abou'?"

"It was a world full of music and laughter, where people are a little kinder to one another," Luna said, a bit louder than a whisper, and slid a foot back until it encountered the soft mass she was expecting. "But I think a Somnius was dreaming it with me. They're small and grey and furry, when you can see them—they can turn invisible when it suits them—and they make people's dreams stronger, because they like to nibble the bits off the edges that you're not using. They're not dangerous, but if one comes to sleep with you, you have to send it away before morning or you'll never be able to forget the dream you had with it, and you'll always be trying to find that dream again, even in your waking life."

"I wouldn' say tryin' ter find a world where people're kinder was such a bad thing," said Hagrid, patting Luna's back gently enough that she only stumbled forward two paces. "I've made yeh a spot o' tea, and there's a cake left fer yeh an' yer little mongoose friend—say, where'd he go?"

"I was just telling you. I think he may have been a Somnius in disguise." Luna sat down by the campfire, which by now was mostly red-glowing coals. "I hope he knows that he has to go away before morning. It isn't because I didn't like him, or because I don't want him here, but because it would be bad for both of us if he stayed. He can come back sometime—I rather hope he does—but for now, he should go."

"If yeh say so," Hagrid said, shaking his head over the fantasies of Luna Lovegood. "Here's yer tea—drink it while it's hot, now, there's an hour yet till dawn an' it's a chilly night..."

---

Behind them, Disillusioned and curled up in a sleeping bag of his own, Draco held his breath.

*Is she talking to—me?*

*No. She's just being her usual mad self. She slept through the whole day in the otherworld, there's*

*no way she could know what it's like, and there's no way she could know the mongoose was me, or that I was still with her now.*

*But whether or not she's talking to me, she's right. I need to get back inside before morning, and come up with a good story about why I wasn't in bed last night...*

*He grinned, easing himself out of the sleeping bag. I don't think that will be too hard. It won't have smelled very good in there, and we can't exactly open a window. I can say I went to find somewhere I could breathe; even Snape should believe me, if he got a whiff of what they were letting off.*

*On his feet, sleeping bag over his arm, Draco stepped cautiously out of the campsite, turning as he crossed the border for one last look. Luna's slender figure was silhouetted against the dim firelight, and Hagrid's homely features emerged from the darkness like those of a kindly pagan god on the other side of the firepit. Weasley murmured something in her sleep, and the quiet squeaking of Longbottom's snores hitched for a moment, then resumed.*

*Remind me again how I got elected their protector? They don't even like me...*

*But he knew how it had happened. He had discovered what it felt like to be the victim rather than the bully, and immediately thereafter been offered a third way. Without ever thinking about it, he had assumed that the world consisted of only those two choices, so the possibility of being neither had shaken his entire belief system, which had already been tottering with the destruction of his carefully crafted "prince of the magical world" image.*

*And from there, it was only a short step to secretly guarding people I used to humiliate, and plotting to help the ones I spent years trying to bring down...*

*Careful not to step on twigs, Draco slipped away towards the castle.*

*Let's get one thing straight, though. I'm in this for what I want, what I can get out of it, namely, a one-way ticket to Mum's world. I'm not being altruistic, I'm not being generous, I'm not even being particularly nice. In fact, I've been nasty to these people, and I'm enjoying it, and I'm going to enjoy the eighteenth of October even more.*

*He yawned, covering his mouth with one hand.*

*If only I could remember why it matters that the cup's in Aunt Bella's vault, what it has to do with that day and my temporarily kidnapping Weasley...*

*The connection had been perfectly clear to him for a few moments in the other Forest. He had caught on to what Abby had been getting at with her cryptic words, her hints and half-instructions.*

*And now I've caught off, if there is such a thing. I have no idea what the cup has to do with it.*

*But I remember that I did know, and I trust Abby. Besides, my part of the plan's simple enough. The cup will come up when it comes up, and I'll just have to play it by ear when it does.*

Playing by ear segued naturally into thoughts of music, and Draco began to hum as he sighted Hogwarts through the trees. His song of choice came from the same musical show as “It’s a Dangerous Game”, but spoke instead of finding the one special person who would change a life. Its singer thought that she had perhaps found that one for herself, but balked at saying it in so many words, so instead she hedged, hoping that “someone like you” would someday discover “someone like me”.

*Funny to think it's Ray's Luna who taught me this song. She does have “someone like me”, someone like I could have been if I'd grown up in a world like his. And I have...*

Draco grabbed that thought, trampled it flat, and kicked mental underbrush over it. *None of that, now. You're going away forever as soon as the Dark Lord gets offed, remember? There'll be a whole world full of girls for you to explore. You are not allowed to get attached to one over here. Not allowed, full stop, end of story, no more to be said.*

Novice though he was in the ways of the heart, Draco suspected it might not be this easy.

*All right, treat it like Occlumency. You can't clear your mind by willing yourself not to think about certain things. You have to have something to think about. What's safe to think about? Safe and interesting enough to keep me on it for a while?*

A rambling thought of Abby's, one that the little Gryffindor had shared with him after dinner on the previous day, came to mind. Draco set his “busy brain” to the task of sneaking back into the castle without being caught and let the back of his mind wander away into memory, until he could have sworn he felt Abby's fine curly hair against his arm and heard her sweet treble tones.

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“I’m going to make a pretend,” Abby announced with all the solemnity of a girl declaring she was engaged.

“All right,” Draco said slowly, unsure of his cue. “Do you want my help?”

“A little bit, yes. Was your Dark Lord around when you were born?”

“Yes, he was. He didn't go away until I was about a year and a half old.”

Abby nodded, one hand against her cheek. “Your birthday is before Ray and Neenie's, isn't it?”

“Yes, by almost two months.” *The night I found out that I wasn't who I'd always thought I was, was also the night I officially came of age—how ironic is that?* “It's the fifth of June.”

“And you look like your blood father?”

Draco grimaced. “Don't remind me.”

“I'm sorry. I need it for the pretend.” Abby drummed her fingers against the arm of the little

couch they were sharing, humming a monotonous tune. “I think it's ready,” she said after a few moments. “Do you want to hear it?”

“What is it about?”

“You.”

“In that case, always.” Draco assumed a pose of great attentiveness.

Abby giggled. “You're so silly. All right. This is a pretend like Frederic, in *Pirates*. He had to be a pirate, to steal and sink ships and do wrong, even though his heart wanted to go back to the world where he was born, where everything was good and right. *Pirates* is a silly way to tell that story, but your story is one that isn't so silly.”

“Oh, really?”

Abby tapped a finger admonishingly against Draco's lips. “Don't interrupt. It's rude.”

Draco pressed the fingertips of both hands against his mouth, symbolically sealing it.

“Good.” Abby began untangling her perpetually snarled hair with her fingers. “You see, you never really belonged to the people you look like. You were really Aunt Cecy's baby, hers and...” She glanced downwards. “You-Know-Who.”

Draco burst out laughing, causing Abby to draw herself up indignantly. “If you think it's that funny, I don't see why I should tell you any more,” she huffed. “You do know who I mean, and if that means something else where you come from, I forgot about it!”

“I'm sorry,” Draco said, getting himself under control. “I didn't mean to laugh at you. It was just the idea...” A snicker escaped him as he realized that, in this world, “You-Know-Who” was indeed a father. A grandfather, even.

*But he's not at all the same as the Dark Lord, counterparts or no. They're even more different than Ray and I are.*

“Sorry,” he said again. “Please go on.”

Abby eyed him dubiously, but continued. “You're the reason they both look so sad all the time. Because they got married in secret, to try it out, and decided that they would tell everyone about it when you were born. But the very same day you were born, you disappeared—poof!—and both of them were so upset that they forgot their manners and blamed the other one for it, and that's why they stopped living like married people.”

Draco pieced this together and shrugged. It made at least nominal sense. “So why do I look like the people who raised me, then?” he asked, playing along.

“Because the same one who stole you—the Dark Lord—used his Dark magic to change the way

you looked. He might even have used the bad kind of blood magic, the kind that would take away all your blood from Aunt Cecy and..." Abby glanced quellingly at him. "The other person."

"But if all my blood from her was gone, then we'd never be able to tell I was really hers," Draco said. "I should have turned out like the family who brought me up."

Abby shook her head. "They could change your blood," she said. "They couldn't change your soul. Your soul was a soul from this world, and it wanted the things we have here. Music, and laughing, and light, and love. And when you got to be a grownup, just like Frederic, you went back to where you came from." She giggled. "You made a bit of a mess of it, like he did. And the people who stole you, just like the pirates, are trying to get you to come back and stay longer... I added up once, and if Frederic had really stayed until his twenty-first birthday, he would have been eighty-four years old. That's a long, long time."

"Yes, it is. And I certainly don't intend to hang around that world for any eighty-four years." Draco planted a hand in the center of Abby's chest. "Not when there are little sisters in this one, ripe for the tickling!"

Abby shrieked and squirmed, but Draco knew no mercy. None, that is, until she managed to writhe out from under his hand, pounce onto his chest, and turn the tables...

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*We wore ourselves out laughing, and then I walked her up to bed. I'm not surprised she was Sorted into Gryffindor—she runs straight at life, never stops for a second to think about which way she's going or what might be wiser to do...*

Draco sat down on his own bed and wrinkled his nose at the stale odor in the air. A quick Freshening Spell cleared it out, and he hit the interior of his wardrobe with a Cleaning Charm before grabbing a set of robes to take to the showers.

*It's really for her I'm fighting. For her, for little Dragon, for Mum—especially for Mum—Moony and Danger, Ray and Neenie, Harry and Ginny and Ron, Neville and Meghan...*

And Luna.

*She always seems so happy with Ray, but the way she was eyeing me yesterday, I didn't quite know what to think...*

Firmly, Draco pushed this out of his mind. He had a mission to accomplish in less than a month, and anything which wasn't directly related to that had to go.

*I may not see quite how, but it's my best shot at getting the cup. Plus, I raise myself in the Dark Lord's esteem, lower Lucius in same, and free a prisoner who'd never have a chance on his own.*

*And just to put the icing on the fairy cake, I get to cast the Imperius Curse on Ron Weasley.*

*Yes, I'd say this is going to be quite a lot of fun.*

## Be Careful 42: What You Find Important

Ron groaned. His head ached, his wrists were sore, and he was damp all over. He seemed to be sitting up, leaning against what felt like a tree.

*Merlin, what'd I do? Was an arse to Harry and Hermione, right, I remember that bit. Walked out into the rain, got that. But what came after? Did I hit my head on a branch, or trip and fall on something? Have I been lying out here all night? I'd have thought one of them would come after me, but I suppose if I got them angry enough at me, they might've decided I wasn't worth it anymore...*

“Wakey-wakey, Weasley,” said a voice which was certainly neither Harry's nor Hermione's. “We haven't got all night here.”

Ron's eyes shot open. Draco Malfoy, his features lit demonically from below by the wand in his hand, smirked at him. “So nice of you to come out and play.”

“You—” Ron started to lunge forward, but the thick rope around his chest jerked him back. His wrists were sore, he now discovered, because they were tied together behind him. “How did you —”

“Ah-ah.” Malfoy set down the wand he'd been holding, which Ron recognized with a further surge of fury as his own, and drew another from within his robes. “Trade secret, you know. Besides, I don't have to tell you anything. I'm not the one who mouthed off to his best friends and walked out on them in the middle of a war.”

“You've got no friends,” Ron growled, trying to use the familiarity of being angry with Malfoy to stave off the painful truth in the Slytherin's words.

Malfoy looked him up and down. “Neither have you,” he said. “Not after what I assume you said in there. I couldn't hear it—Granger must have done your protective spells, they're quite good—but you've been getting closer and closer to snapping for days, and tonight you finally did. What triggered it off?”

“None of your damn business.” The tightness in Ron's chest was not all due to his bonds. *It was the Horcrux, the way it kept whispering to me, it made everything worse and I just couldn't take it anymore, and now I've ruined everything, if they get into a fight and they can't win because I*

*wasn't there, or if Malfoy can backtrack somehow and find them again and catch them like he did me...*

“They shouldn't've let you wear that thing,” Malfoy murmured, as if to himself. “But you'd probably have shouted at them if they'd tried to take your turns for you, wouldn't you?”

“What?” Ron said, hoping he was doing a good enough impression of being dumbfounded. He didn't have to act much. *He sounds like he's been watching us—like he knows everything already—but if he does, why take just me? Why not stick around and wait for Harry and Hermione to leave?* A glance around had already told him they weren't in the same place where he'd left his friends behind, and he was starting to remember what had happened.

*I'd just got round a big tree, I could hear Hermione behind me but I couldn't bear the thought of facing her after that, I was about to Disapparate, and then—*

“Never mind,” said Malfoy, breaking Ron's train of thought. “Hold still—not that you have much choice.”

He sniggered at his own joke, then pointed his wand at Ron, who braced himself for an Unforgivable—

“Accio loose hair.”

Ron felt a plucking at his robes, and a tri-colored cloud shot towards Malfoy, who nodded in satisfaction. “Excellent.” He took a sheet of parchment from his pocket, unfolded it on his lap, and shook his wand briskly over it, dropping the hair onto it.

“What do you want that for?” Ron asked, peering suspiciously at the other boy. “Going to try and find the others?”

Malfoy looked up at him with his familiar Merlin-but-you're-stupid-Weasley look. “If I'd wanted the others, all I had to do was hang around there,” he said. “Shoved you behind a tree and caught Granger while she was calling for you. Potter would have come out after her eventually, and then I'd have had you all. Since I didn't do that, perhaps you could conclude that I've got something else in mind. That is, if you had anything between your ears except solid bone.”

The insults were oddly calming, putting this meeting back on a familiar footing. “At least I don't have to torture people whenever my Master tells me to,” Ron shot back.

“No.” Malfoy was sorting the hair out by color, black in one pile, red in another, brown and curly in a third. “You just torture your friends, or should I say your ex-friends, whenever things get too hard for you.” He looked up, the wandlight making his eyes seem to glow. “It probably wouldn't have killed any of you to stop in somewhere, you know. Pick up a bit of news. Get your arm seen to. How does it feel, by the way?”

“What?”

“Your arm. The one you managed to splinch halfway off getting out of the Ministry—or was it Granger who did that to you? I was never very clear on that.”

Ron rotated his left shoulder, discovering an unusual lack of pain there. “It's fine,” he said awkwardly. “And I don't think we ever figured out who did it...” The disconnect between his conversational partner and the topic brought him up short. “Wait a second—how did you know about the Ministry?”

“I didn't, until just now.” Malfoy grinned at him snidely. “I knew someone broke in, pretending to be Ministry workers, but the only thing that officially went missing was that creepy eye of Moody's.” He shuddered briefly, but his grin was back the next second. “The reports said there were three of them, two men and a woman. And I always thought it was a little odd, you getting ill just in time for Potter and Granger to vanish off the face of the earth.”

Ron's stomach plummeted. *They'll know Dad and Mum were covering for me as soon as they see me, they'll break the wards on the Burrow and grab them while they're sleeping—Ginny's at Hogwarts, Snape'll hand her over in a second—Fred and George will try to go after them and probably get caught themselves, Charlie and Bill will be next, Percy might even get his head out of his arse for this—I've killed them all, my whole family, just because I didn't know when to keep my mouth shut—*

“Still, if the Ministry believes it, who am I to judge?” Malfoy's voice broke into Ron's panicked thoughts. The blond boy had pulled a flask of potion from his pocket, a potion with a familiar muddy appearance—and now he was picking a few hairs from the top of one of the piles and adding them to the potion, which was bubbling up and turning the appetizing color of hot chocolate—

“I'd much rather avoid any... unpleasantness at school,” Malfoy went on, swirling the potion in its flask. “And if I know Longbottom and Luna—Lovegood, that is—”

“I know who she is,” Ron said curtly, his mind still in turmoil. *What is he doing with Polyjuice? Going to try to make me look like Harry and get more credit for bringing me in? It won't do him much good once the stuff wears off, or once You-Know-Who gets a proper look at me...*

He quickly abandoned this line of thought, as it seemed likely to cause true screaming panic in very short order.

“I know you know who she is.” Malfoy sniffed the potion and nodded, satisfied. “I was saying, they'd be unlikely to let me live past tomorrow if I got their dear little Weaslette sent off to Azkaban. And that's not even counting what Potter might do when he heard about it. Still, Potter's off hiding in the woods. Lovegood and Longbottom are at Hogwarts. And I have to be back there tonight.” He glanced at his watch and shuddered. “I'm already probably in trouble for being out after curfew. Still, I'd say this will excuse me.” Setting the potion down between them, he drew his wand again. “All right, Weasley, are you going to drink this willingly, or do we do it the hard way?”

Ron scowled. "I'm not about to drink anything you give me."

"Oh, good," Malfoy murmured, starting to smile. "I did hope you'd say that." He glanced upwards. "You saw it. He's making me."

His head came back down, and his wand swung into line with Ron's chest. "Imperio!"

In the last instant before the comforting pink haze filled his mind, Ron swore at himself for not expecting this sooner...

He blinked, and wondered vaguely why he'd thought there was trouble. Of course there was no trouble... Draco, his friend Draco, was just going to let him go, take these stupid itchy ropes off him, and then he'd drink that nice Polyjuice, just the way he was supposed to...

Would it really turn him into Harry? It didn't look like quite the right color for Harry... he remembered how Crabbe and Goyle had turned it horrid colors, but the Ministry workers they'd pretended to be had mostly been nice, though Runcorn, the bloke Harry'd impersonated, had been dark and threatening...

He swallowed the last cabbage-tasting lump and grimaced. The stuff was already taking hold, shrinking him rather as he'd shrunk to be Reg Cattermole, though there was definitely a set of sensations there hadn't been for that transformation... his chest itched rather, his robes felt a bit too small there, and a very important place seemed to have gone numb and cold...

"Damn," Draco said mildly, peering at Ron's front. "Forgot about that. Good thing I know what one looks like. Have a seat, Weasley, it's done. Lean forward so I can get your hands again."

Ron seated himself obediently, nearly tripping over his robes, which were several inches too long and alternately tight and baggy in the strangest places. As he leaned forward, something fell into his line of sight, startling him a bit. It was brown and bouncy and seemed to be attached to him, as it was moving from side to side when he shook his head, but he couldn't think what it might be...

Draco stepped away and lifted his wand.

Ron screamed.

Malfoy's sideways flick of a wand, conjuring something painfully tight around his chest, only stopped him for a second, as did the second flick, which restored the rope binding Ron to the tree behind him. The third created a gag in his mouth, effectively cutting off the scream, which paradoxically helped Ron regain a bit of equilibrium. There had been something horribly disconcerting about hearing himself shrieking in a voice he'd spent six years learning to tune out at need.

"Not too bad," Malfoy said, crossing his arms and regarding Ron. "Might have to shorten the robes up a bit, so you don't fall and break your neck, but we can always claim you ran out and had

to borrow Potter's. As long as you haven't got a tag in the back, that is. Let me check." He stepped up and leaned Ron's head forward, brushing long brown hair out of the way. "Nope, no tag. I guess when you're a foot taller than anybody else around, you don't need one."

Ron made a comment regarding Malfoy's parentage, preferences, and eventual destination.

"I didn't quite catch that, Weasley," said Malfoy, his eyes glinting again. "If you think you can stop yourself from screaming, we might be able to try it over."

Ron repeated himself, adding a few comments on Malfoy's personal appearance and dietary habits.

"That sounds like agreement to me." Malfoy twitched his wand, vanishing the gag.

"You sadistic bastard!" Ron shouted, wincing as the words came out an octave and a half too high. "You turned me into Hermione!"

"Yes, I did." Malfoy frowned. "And she doesn't swear. I think we'll have to go with the gag after all, at least until I get you into the cellar." Another wave of his wand restored the cloth across Ron's mouth. "Sorry about that."

*Sorry about that? You've kidnapped me, you're about to hand me over to You-Know-Who, you've Polyjuiced me into Hermione bloody Granger—and you're sorry about a flipping gag?*

*I think someone needs to sort out his priorities...*

## Be Careful 43: What Wish You Tell

Draco had worried that Weasley might struggle on the way into the Manor, but the Polyjuiced Gryffindor couldn't seem to get the knack of walking in a girl's body, and stumbled behind Draco unresisting as Draco towed “her” down the lane towards the gates.

*Should probably try to think about him as Granger. Make it less likely I'll slip. Granger, Granger, Potter's Mudblood Granger...*

Draco pulled his captive close, put his right arm around hi—her—and raised his left above his head, his Mark granting him and W—Granger passage onto the grounds. Once inside, he quickly shoved her away, keeping a firm hold on the lead rope he'd conjured around her neck. “Need a shower tonight,” he muttered, shuddering. “Extra soap...”

Granger's color rose, and she snarled something impolite through her gag.

*Perfect. None of them know the real Granger, so none of them know she ought to be all stiff and pale and ignoring me with dignity. She'll play right into the way they expect a Muggleborn to behave. I might actually pull this off...*

“Come on, then,” Draco said, giving the lead rope a tug. Granger staggered forward a pace or two, glaring Killing Curses at him—*her eyes are the wrong color, though, would be even without the Polyjuice—Potter could pull it off, but he's not here, not unless I made a mistake with the hairs and we're going to have a random changeover at the half-hour mark—*

The thought made him chuckle, and he started for the house, dragging a furious Granger behind him. The door swung open at his approach.

*Just like in rehearsals, Draco. Play it young, eager, hungry for approval.*

The only person in sight turned on the stairs, startled, as Draco pulled Granger inside with him.

*Perfect. Big smile, a hint of mean...*

“She followed me home, Aunt Bella,” Draco said, grinning at the witch. “Can I keep her?”

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Narcissa Malfoy turned her head sharply as she heard a familiar voice, followed by her sister's crowing laugh, coming from the entrance hall. *What is Draco doing home? He should be at Hogwarts—*

“—spotted her in the woods outside Hogsmeade, and I was able to chase her down,” Draco was saying as Narcissa hurried into the entrance hall. He leaned on the bottom of one of the banisters, a rope held loosely in his hand, its other end looped around the neck of a brown-haired girl with her hands tied behind her back. She was muttering into the gag covering her mouth, staring in mingled hatred and fear at Bellatrix, who was several steps up from Draco and beaming down at him.

“Was Potter with her?” Bella asked. “Any sign of him at all?”

Draco shook his head. “I'd have followed her further, tried to track him down too, but I didn't want to lose my chance at her. If he was in earshot, though, he'll have heard her screaming.” He turned to flick a contemptuous look across Granger, as Narcissa realized the girl must be. “She claimed he wasn't anywhere around, but she'd have said that whether he was or not...”

“Of course.” Bella began to smile, and Granger shrank back, blanching. “But we can have a few answers out of her in short order.”

“Answers out of whom?” said Lucius, coming around the stairs. “Draco, why have you—ahh.” The sound was one of profound satisfaction as he saw the tethered Granger. “Potter's Mudblood, I presume?”

Draco nodded, tying the rope in his hand to the end of the banister. “She practically begged me to catch her,” he said, stepping away to circle Granger, who eyed him warily, as if estimating how close he'd have to be for her to kick him. “Crashing about in the trees as if she had a Leg-Locker on her. Do you think the Dark Lord will want to question her himself? Should someone call him back to tell him she's been caught?”

Lucius and Bellatrix laughed at Draco's eager tone. “All in good time, my son,” Lucius said, coming around to clap Draco on the back. “I assume you have her wand?”

“It was lost while we were fighting. I didn't bother retrieving it.” Draco looked worried. “Is that all right?”

“Perfectly,” Lucius assured him. “So long as she no longer has it, she will be no threat to us.”

Granger's eyes went to Narcissa, who nearly took a step back. The terror and desperation in that look threatened to overwhelm her, and she sensed somehow that the girl was holding herself in check by the thinnest possible thread of courage and strength.

*Still, she is controlled. She is neither screaming in panic nor thrashing about hurting herself in an attempt to harm us.*

*Perhaps the reputation of Gryffindors is deserved after all.*

“Draco,” said Bella, leaning on the banister to look down at her nephew. He turned a shining face up to her, looking rather like a puppy hoping for a treat. “For such good work, I think you deserve a reward. What would you like best?”

“Not to get in trouble for being out after curfew,” Draco said promptly, making his father and aunt laugh again. Even Narcissa managed a smile. Perhaps her son was indeed the young man he had seemed to her in those few days in the summer...

“Come now, think bigger than that,” Bellatrix mock-scolded, shaking her finger at him. “You are the son of a pureblood house and line! The world is open to you, if you have the wit to ask for it! What do you truly desire?”

“Well...” Draco looked away, kicking at the floor with one toe. “It's sort of silly. But I guess if anyone could do it, you could.”

“Tell me,” Bella urged. “If it is in my power, and if the Dark Lord does not disapprove, you shall have it.”

Draco nodded. “Mother.” Narcissa looked up in surprise. “Do you remember when I was very young, and you took me to Gringotts, to a vault I'd never seen before?”

“To—ah, yes.” Narcissa could easily see how that visit could have made a strong impression on her son. “There had been a report of an attempted robbery,” she said to her sister. “I wanted to be sure your treasure was safe—the goblins reported that it was, and I have no reason to mistrust them, but there is no substitute for seeing with one's own eyes...”

“Of course not.” Bella looked back at Draco. “How old were you?” she asked.

“I'm not sure. I think five, maybe?”

“Yes, five sounds right,” said Lucius musingly. “Robberies at Gringotts are few and far between, and you were quite small when the last one occurred, Draco. Old enough to speak and understand, but not yet in lessons all day.”

Draco inclined his head in thanks to his father, then turned back to his aunt. “I've always remembered that visit,” he said, his cheeks taking on a faint tinge of pink. “And I've always wondered if the shelves of helmets and goblets and armor and things are really as tall as I remember, and if the gold is really piled so high. So what I want... it's stupid and childish, I know, and I shouldn't even ask, but...”

“Do you want to revisit my vault at Gringotts, Draco?” Bellatrix asked, laughing at the hopeful look which came over Draco's features at the words. “Never mind, I can see you do. When is your next Hogsmeade weekend?”

“It's November, 22 November—Aunt Bella, really?” Draco was quivering with suppressed

excitement.

“I will speak to Severus myself.”

“Promise?” Draco said, tilting his head to one side as though he were again five years old.

Bellatrix smiled. “You have the word of a Black and a Lestrangle. I should make sure the new charms have taken proper effect in any case...”

Narcissa allowed herself a silent sigh of relief. For a hideous moment, she had thought Draco was about to ask for a chance to torture Hermione Granger with his own wand.

*This is an odd request, perhaps, but harmless. Though how long will it be before his own ideas of fun are contaminated by what is all around him?*

“Will I get to watch the Dark Lord question her?” Draco's voice broke into her musings. “Will you call him back now? Or did he not want you to call him for anything but Potter?”

“Refresh my memory,” said Lucius, frowning. “Did you, or did you not, Draco, mention that... Miss Granger had screamed when you captured her?” His tone made the title an insult, which Granger returned in kind through her gag.

“At the top of her lungs.” Draco winced, rubbing his left ear. “I'll have to go up to the hospital wing when I get back, get my hearing checked.”

“Did she recognize you? Mention your name, perhaps?”

“Only seven or eight times,” Draco drawled. “Why?”

“Yes, Lucius, why does that matter?” Narcissa asked her husband. “Why should it be important —” She broke off with a gasp as the answer came to her.

“Because, Cissy,” Bella purred, “if it should happen she was lying—if Potter was there after all—if it should happen he heard who was abducting his dear little Mudblood friend...”

“He will come,” Narcissa whispered in shock. “He will attempt a rescue.”

“Indeed.” Lucius smiled thinly. “And the Dark Lord will not fault us at all for waiting to summon him if we can present him with the boy who has so often escaped us in the past. Think of the rewards he will give us for that...”

*We might survive the war. More, we might be returned to some semblance of humanity. Narcissa had to lay a hand on the wall beside her to hold herself up. My family could yet be saved, and all thanks to my son's quick wandwork and quicker mind.*

Pity for Granger, for Potter, for those the Dark Lord would savage tried to worm its way into her mind, but she forced it out. She cared for her own people, her own kind, no one else. It was not

safe to do otherwise.

*Though I have wondered all my life what a world would be like where that was not true...*

---

Safely in the cellars, Draco located the small opening into the side passage where the Manor-core was hidden and forced Granger through it before following.

*I think it's safe to use his real name again now—I'll be going straight back to school as soon as I'm done here, and no one there will know what's happened. Good thing he's in Granger's body, though, his would never have fit through that little hole...*

Leaning against the wall, Draco went into communication with the Manor. *Keep sound in here with us*, he told it. *Don't let anyone else know we're here, much less what we say.*

Weasley was watching him out of the corner of his eye, suspicion and disgust mingled about equally on his feminine features. Draco drew his wand with his right hand, feeling the confirmation of his request rippling through his left, and removed Weasley's gag. “Something you want to say?” he inquired.

Weasley treated him to two full minutes of highly unflattering description, encompassing every part of Draco's body and personal habits, then moving onto his parents and aunt. He was just about to start on the next generation up when Draco yawned ostentatiously. “You kiss Granger with that mouth?” he asked.

“Do I—no!” It was a high-pitched shriek instead of the manly shout of outrage Draco was sure Weasley had intended, but it got the point across.

“Why not?”

“Uh...”

Draco checked his watch and grimaced. “As scintillating as this conversation is, we're low on time. Listen up.”

“Give me one good reason I should listen to you,” Weasley snarled.

“Because I'm about to tell you where I stashed your wand and how you can find it when you get out of here.”

Weasley froze with his mouth half-open. Draco kept talking. “Walk straight back from where you'll come out, about thirty paces for you right now or twenty if you're back to being yourself. It's in a tall elm tree with a cross carved at the bottom, in a hollow in the trunk about ten feet up. You can probably reach it from the ground in your own body, but if you get there before the Polyjuice wears off—you've got about half an hour, by the way—Granger's a tree-climber.” He grinned. “I've seen her at it.”

This piece of information rocked Weasley back on his heels, into the stone wall behind him. Draco let his grin widen a bit and went on. “There's a price on your freedom, but you'll understand that when you get where I'm supposed to be taking you. Which should be right now. So come on, and whatever you do, don't shout.”

Weasley was silent all the way down the hall to the door of the particular cellar that had been made escape-proof (at least, for those unlucky enough not to have a Malfoy on their side). His face, or rather Granger's, was frozen in a look of blank incomprehension. It was an unusual expression to see on those features.

*I doubt there's anything in the world Granger couldn't understand if she tried hard enough.*

*Whereas I'm probably going to throw Weasley completely with this.*

“Have a nice escape,” he whispered through brown hair, cutting the ropes off Weasley's wrists and opening the door with his wand. “And tell Potter his sister's a Slytherin.”

A quick shove, a slam, and the thing was done.

*Well, nearly done. I still need to arrange for them to actually escape...*

Draco turned and went back up the hall. He'd do this from the actual Manor-core itself, to make it easier on himself.

*I dug the tunnel down to our boundaries by hand, or rather by wand, before Weasley woke up. Now I just have to open the wall of the cellar and make a matching tunnel through our grounds to meet up with that one.*

*Hermione really is a genius—imagine thinking to check if the wards on the Manor's boundaries go below the ground or not. And I'm lucky that they don't. If they did, I'd have to be physically present where I wanted them to drop and no two ways about it. But since they stop a bit below ground level, as long as I keep my escapees nice and deep all the way to the tunnel, I shouldn't have a problem...*

He knew there were charms laid on the grounds to keep exactly this from happening, but the overall magic of Malfoy Manor itself superseded any additional spells laid on top of it. The boundary wards, being in place so long, had become part of that magic. The anti-tunneling spells had not.

*I always knew it was good to be me. I just never knew exactly how good it was.*

Baring his teeth in a savage predator's grin, Draco slid through the camouflaged opening once more and vanished from sight.

## Be Careful 44: Who You Dream Of

He crossed the courtyard towards the garden on the other side. Though the day was warm for November, none of the bushes would be flowering, but he thought she would likely still be there.

*It is her favorite place. I have teased her sometimes about claiming blood with the wrong family, but she only laughs and tells me that I would never see her clean if I were right.*

He rounded the last corner, and there she was, kneeling beside a bush and reaching carefully through its thorny stems to pluck out a weed. Casually, he cleared his throat.

“So here you are.” His dream woman rose to her feet, her smile as sweet as the flowers that would fill this place with scent in the spring. “I was beginning to think you'd forgot about me.”

“About you? Never.” He advanced towards her, holding out his hand, and she met him halfway with her own, the touch of her skin sending a familiar thrill through him. “I have merely been too busy, and too worried...”

“To seek help with those worries, and rest from your work, in the one place you know is truly safe,” the woman interrupted, bringing her other hand up and smudging mud across the end of his nose. “Fool that you are. Why do you not come to see me more, instead of less, when you know you will be troubled?”

In the real world, anyone who had dared to speak to him so would have been snubbed, anyone who dared to do such a thing likely hexed, but this was a world of his own devising, and he merely smiled as he brushed the dirt from his face. “Likely because I am that very fool you name me,” he said lightly. “And because I fear to wear out my welcome here.”

“Come now, surely you know I would be only too glad to see you every day.”

*Of course you say that. You are a figment of my imagination. What I truly fear is to overtax you, to load whatever portion of my mind you represent with troubles and worries until it collapses. Besides destroying my pretty illusion of a woman who cares for me, it would also mean I lost the one source of comfort that has never failed me.*

He glanced up at the castle which rose behind them. *The real version has become a burden to me. I cannot bear to sacrifice this idealized one as well. My visits here must be sparing, but by the*

*same token, I shall have them when I truly need them.*

“You say that now,” he replied belatedly, realizing his dream-love was waiting for an answer. “Perhaps I shall take you up on the offer, and see what you say after a week or two weeks of my crotchets and quirks.”

“I will say that you are not only a person with whom I enjoy sharing time, but a fascinating personality which I may busy myself trying to understand.” She shook her free hand clean of dirt and drew her wand, Summoning the basket of gardening tools with it. “You know my needs with regards to my work.”

“Give me a task or I shall go mad,” he quoted. “Indeed I do. But you have never had trouble finding tasks before this, and the one you mentioned to me on our last visit—the young man so wounded in his soul that he reverted to a basically infantile emotional state, accepting without question the values of those who showed him kindness, though it meant denying all that he had been taught in his life—I cannot believe he has ceased to interest you.”

“Oh, far from it. But he has begun to heal, and to grow again, though he will need guidance still. At least he accepts it. You, on the other hand, constantly refuse any help but the simplest forms that I can provide.” She sighed. “I will not lie to you, my love. I am rather hurt that you will never let me give you all that I can.”

“But I had thought that you had.” He pulled her close and leaned down to her, brushing his lips across her ear. “Many, many times.”

She pulled away indignantly. “You know perfectly well I did not mean that. Why will you never let me soothe a bit of the pain from your old memories, or give you some immunity against the horrors you must witness and condone day after day? You are strong, but no strength can last forever.”

He turned to look at one of the towers of the castle. “It will not need to.” His voice was harsh even to his own ears. “Only long enough to finish my work.”

She sighed again. “And then you will go.”

“Yes.”

“Have you never thought that perhaps she might prefer some other form of reparation?”

“It is mine to make. Whether or not she would have accepted it, I can never know. And may I inquire precisely how we came onto this topic?” He looked back at her. “I certainly did not intend to bring it up.”

“I find myself unsure,” she confessed, beginning to smile. “I believe it started with a quotation from Jane Austen, and moved from there into what I hope we can find the time to do before you leave...”

“Why not now?” He pulled her close and swung her into his arms. She squealed like the girl she was no longer and kicked her feet in token resistance, but also held tightly to him as he turned in place.

*Strange, how my mind works. It disregards time-honored rules of magic in constructing this world, but insisted upon a ritual handfasting before three witnesses, all those years ago, before she would consent to our first joining.*

Though perhaps he had simply been trying to remind himself that this place was both benign and impossible. He could think of no other reason for the three people who had watched the simple ceremony of vows and wands between himself and his dream-love.

*But enough of memory. His quarters, dimly-lit and cool, materialized around them. It is now time for me to attend to—as hilarious as I am sure my colleagues in reality would find the phrase, it is perfectly accurate here—my wife.*

He crossed the room to the bed and bent his head to bring their lips together before laying her down.

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“So, tell me what troubles you such that you felt the need to seek me out,” she said later, running her fingers down his shoulder. “And the full truth, mind you. I am no fainting miss. Try to shelter me and I shall boil you in your own cauldron.”

“I quail in terror,” he said coolly, and smiled to hear her laugh. “My troubles are much the same as they have been. I must maintain the front of the perfect servant to a megalomaniac sociopath, allow his minions freedom to harm children supposedly under my care while simultaneously keeping them enough in check that none are killed or dealt truly lasting harm, and work to aid his young and incompetent enemies under his nonexistent nose.”

“Yes, so you have said. I have often wondered why you chose such a simple set of tasks, so unworthy of your great talents...”

It was his turn to laugh at her perfect dry delivery. “I had indeed been finding it a trifle dull. But no more. You recall what I have told you of the boy on whose behalf I swore an Unbreakable Vow last year?”

“Oh, yes.” His love's voice grew soft. “Very well indeed.”

“Judging by his behavior in the first term of school, he has learned precisely the wrong lesson from his inability to kill.” It was his turn to sigh heavily. “He flouted school rules on his second free weekend, and I have no way to discipline him—he will in fact be rewarded, though his transgression did little good for anyone...”

“What do you mean?”

“You know that the students are sometimes allowed to roam the village near the school?”

She nodded.

“This young man remained there, or returned there, well after curfew, and caught one of the children who sneak about defying my so-called master.” He stroked two fingers along the unmarked skin of his left forearm. “Perhaps thinking that I would not give him the credit he deserved for such an impressive deed, he took her not to the school, but to his own home, where she was imprisoned in one of the cellars, along with a man who has been safely incarcerated there for more than a year.”

“You must have feared for her.” She rose from the bed and began to dress, the commonplace movements as graceful as a dance. “And for your cause—your true cause. What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh?” She turned to look at him. “Why?”

“For the simplest of reasons. When the cellar door was next opened, neither man nor girl was present.”

“An escape?” She smiled broadly at his nod. “How was it done?”

“No one has been able to tell.” He slid out of the bed on the other side and reached for his own clothing. “The house in which they were imprisoned is so old that its own accumulated magic overrides any subtle traces. What is certain is that the Dark Lord is furious.” He imbued the title with all the sarcasm he could never use for it in any other place. “He has punished the boy's father, from whose home the escape was made, but the boy himself escaped unscathed, and his mother's sister feels herself bound by the promise she made at the time, so tomorrow he will even have the treat she granted him at the time of his audacious capture.”

“Forgive me, but I fail to see the trouble.” She tilted her head to one side. “Has the promise of such a treat perhaps changed this young man's behavior in some way?”

He snorted. “I could say that. Or I could say that for the past month, since his famous escapade, he has been indiscriminately bullying the other students, boasting about his magical abilities, and carrying out those boasts in classroom practice sessions. Generally involving the students with whom he has had disagreements in the past, and the Unforgivable Curses. As well, he seems fixated on a particular girl, one of the ringleaders of those students who feel it incumbent upon them to fight back. Unfortunately for us all, the only methods he knows to gain her attention are those used by children in the schoolyard.”

“Calling her names, following her about, and snatching her belongings so that she must chase after him to regain them?”

“Exactly. And although she participates in his foolish games with what seems to be good grace,

she is unusual to begin with, so I have no idea whether or not she even realizes what he is doing. I have overheard her remarking that he 'means no harm'. If it were not for her friends, I fear she might fall into the trap of believing him genuinely interested in her."

She finished fastening her robes. "Why do you think that a trap?"

He paused in the act of doing the same. "You do not know this boy as I do," he said with certainty. "He may not be capable of true evil, but he is utterly self-centered and without morals. The day he cares for another human being will be the day the Dark Lord learns to pray."

"I see." Her eyes danced. "Still, you cannot change his behavior, only reward and punish where you may, and hope he takes the lessons you wish him to take from it. Such are the hardships of all parents, and all those who must take their place."

"You have laid your finger on one of the reasons I chose never to have children."

"And what are the others?"

He stepped around the bottom of the bed and gathered her to himself. "You know two of them already," he murmured into her soft hair. "You yourself are the third."

"I?" She drew back enough to look up at him. "Why I?"

"You understand me in a way I fear no other woman ever could or will." *Since you are a creation of my mind, I am certain of it.* "As well, you find me physically attractive, or else you counterfeit surprisingly well..."

"No counterfeit." She laughed softly. "None is needed. Not after all the time you have spent learning what I enjoy and what I do not, and the care you take to give me pleasure as well as taking it for yourself."

"Not quite what I meant, but I thank you anyway." He kissed her forehead just where her blonde hair swept forward in a delicate widow's peak, watching a strand of his own black fall across it.

*What I meant was that no woman outside my dreams ever approached me for any reason except that I could give her something she wanted. No woman but one, and she is gone forever, through my own stupidity and pride. If I could live that day over, I would never make that same choice again...*

*But such a test comes only once in a lifetime, and I have already failed mine. I must live with the consequences, until finally they kill me, as I always knew they would. After that, the pain will end. If some of the old stories are to be believed, if I have made sufficient repayment for my wrongdoing, perhaps there will even be joy.*

*Until that day... at least I have my dreams.*

He bent to kiss his love again, closing his eyes so that, for one timeless moment, he might believe

it real.

## Be Careful 45: What You Abscond With

“Wow,” Draco breathed, staring into the Lestrage vault. It required absolutely no skill at acting, though he was hamming it up a bit for the benefit of his dear aunt.

*Who is living proof that gold can't buy the things that matter most. Like sanity.*

Still, sane or not, Aunt Bella and whatever charms were on the treasures stockpiled in her vault were the only things between him and a certain golden cup.

*And said cup is... Draco let his eyes rove up one set of shelves. Right where it should be. I know I can't Summon it down or Banish it off the shelf, but as long as I can do magic on myself, I ought to be able to get up there...*

*But first things first. Making sure it won't kill me on contact.*

He reached hesitantly for a suit of armor.

“Touch nothing!” Aunt Bella snapped, swirling her wand above her head to produce a glowing ball and snapping her fingers at the goblin standing behind her, who promptly let the door of the vault re-coalesce between him and them. “I am not in the mood to explain to your mother, or to Severus, why you have burns all over your hands. And your arms and legs, as well, if the Gemino Curse works as it should.”

Draco thrust his hands behind his back. “Gemino Curse?” he asked. “What does that do?”

“Why don't I show you?” Aunt Bella waved her wand in a lazy curlicue around the vault. “There. The Flagrante Curse is lifted—these will not burn you now. Pick up a Galleon, Draco, but hold it loosely.”

Draco bent and scooped up a gold coin from one of the piles on the floor, then dropped it in surprise as a shower of other Galleons erupted from every place his hand had touched metal.

Aunt Bella laughed at the expression on his face. “Now, can you pick out the original from the copies?” she asked.

“No.” Draco went to his knees, looking more closely at the Galleons. “Are these others real gold, or stuff like the leprechauns make?”

“Clever boy. Yes, the copies are similar to leprechaun gold, though obviously superior, as they were produced by wizard's magic—or should I say witch's?” She smirked, twirling her wand. “They take a few days to vanish, rather than a few hours, but they are just as worthless as anything made by some barbaric Irish animal.”

“But nothing you made could ever be worthless!” Draco protested, eyes artfully wide, and got another laugh for his troubles. “May I have this Galleon, Aunt Bella? The real one? Not to spend, just as a pocket piece. To remind me of today.”

“Of course you may.” She flicked her wand sharply at the imitation Galleons, which vanished, leaving one gold piece sitting on the floor of the vault.

Draco reached for it, then stopped, holding his hand carefully six inches above it. Aunt Bella grinned at him. “You have more brains than your father, it seems.” She pointed her wand at the Galleon and twisted it in a smaller version of the curling movement she'd used earlier. “Finitum geminitum.” The Galleon twitched once, then was still. “I must admit that amused me rather—Lucius Malfoy's famous wards, escaped by a wandless Mudblood...”

“She probably had some artifact in a hidden pocket that helped her,” Draco said, scooping up the Galleon and silently repeating the incantation his aunt had used. He would need it in a moment. “Dumbledore or McGonagall might have given her something like that. They always favored her. Likely because they thought she proved their theories about magic. I have my own theory about her.”

“Oh?” Aunt Bella turned away from him to survey the heap of treasures. “What might that be?”

“Well, I've never tried it myself, Mother would never let me.” Draco got to his feet and silently drew his wand. “But I know sometimes wizards my age will go out and catch some Muggle girls in an alley or a wood somewhere...”

He swung the wand into line with his aunt's back. “Quiesca tabulla,” he mouthed, letting only a thread of breath escape his lips.

Aunt Bella froze in the act of reaching out for a Galleon of her own. Draco was already reaching into his robes. He had exactly one minute before the Stasis Spell wore off, and he couldn't afford to waste a second.

From his inner pocket, he withdrew a tiny replica of what he was after. Two taps from his wand activated the charms on it. In forty-five seconds, it would grow to the exact size of the one on the shelf.

*Which means I had better be up there by then!*

“Finitum geminitum,” he repeated softly, his wand aimed at the cup high above. It twitched, then went still, just as the Galleon had. He hoped that was a good sign.

*Now to go get it, without touching anything else...*

He thrust his hand into his robes again, pressed his fingers around the second of the gems on his Animagus amulet, and spoke the trigger words. An instant later, he was small and furry. Clamping the tiny cup in his jaws, up the sidepost of the shelf he scurried, then bounded along its edge, balancing precariously at a couple points but making it safely to his goal. A quick tap with a paw confirmed that he'd successfully removed the curse.

*So far, so good.*

He set down the fake cup, latched his teeth around a handle of the real thing, and pulled. The cup of Helga Hufflepuff toppled over the edge of its high shelf to land with a clatter on the pile of gold below. Quickly, Draco nosed the fake into position, scooting it around the emerald-encrusted helmet to the exact center of the spot where the real cup had sat, so that it wouldn't touch anything when it grew to full size.

*Almost there. Just have to get back down, turn human again, and hide it before she wakes up...*

Below him, one of Aunt Bella's hands twitched.

*Uh-oh. I must not have done it right—or I took too long up here—if she spots me like this, there are going to be a lot of questions asked, and I don't think I have answers she'll like—*

Stifling a squeal, Draco leapt from the shelf and followed the cup down into the pile of Galleons. He landed lightly, but the touch of his body produced a fountain of gold, and in an instant he was buried. One frantically reaching paw closed around the handle of the cup, but it was in danger of slipping at any moment, if he wasn't crushed by the weight of the multiplying coins—

*Have to—change back—*

He focused on the reverse word for the amulet spell, and his head and one arm exploded out of the heap of gold. The arm was covered again a second later as the copies valiantly tried to keep up with his change, but he managed to shove enough coins away from his face that he could breathe.

“Draco?” Aunt Bella whirled. “What in Merlin's name—”

“I slipped,” Draco wheezed, floundering towards the edge of the heap. “Fell in.” The hand that was still covered in gold was clutching the cup—*but how am I going to get it out? She'll go spare if she sees it, and I don't think asking for a souvenir will work twice, especially not for this—*

Aunt Bella shook her head. “Your father's son all over,” she said, twirling her wand at the pile, which stopped expanding and began to shrink. “Swimming in other people's gold. I should take you home before you try to convince me it should all be yours by right anyway—and what were you saying about the Granger Mudblood?”

“Huh? Oh, just that she might not be...” Draco heard an ominous ripping sound as he pulled one leg free, and a draft began to investigate areas it had no business in. He froze. “Aunt Bella,” he

said delicately, “would you mind turning around a second?”

His aunt folded her arms. “I saw your nappies changed as a baby, Draco. I doubt you have anything now that you didn't have then.”

“Yes, but...” Draco could feel his face going hotter than the gold would have if the Flagrate Curse hadn't been removed.

She grinned at him. “The correct answer,” she said, “is ‘I don't want to make Uncle Rodolphus jealous.’”

“Aunt Bella!” Draco yelled.

The witch turned her back, her laugh echoing around the vault like the sound of five or six crows all cawing at once.

“I really, really...” Draco clambered out of the gold, stuffed the cup quickly inside his abbreviated robes, and repaired them with a flick of his wand. “...really didn't need to know that. If Mum asks why I get all Ts on my N.E.W.T.s, I'm telling her it's your fault, you broke my brain back in November...”

“Perhaps you are not Lucius and Narcissa's son after all,” his aunt said, snickering as she flicked her wand around at the piles of treasure, restoring the curses that kept them safe. Her eyes roamed idly to the silver sword of Gryffindor, which lay on its high shelf among the jumbled chains, and to the golden cup, higher still, sitting innocently between helmet and potion. “Neither of them is renowned for possessing a sense of humor, though Lucius has been known to make the occasional witty remark.”

“Yes, I know,” Draco said, fastening his robes again. “But only on half the occasions he could have.”

Aunt Bella crowed with delight and rapped the butt of her wand against the wooden door of the vault. “Even if your father fails the Dark Lord again, you will have no need to fear,” she said as the door melted away to reveal the goblins waiting on the other side. “Such a fine boy as yourself, so dutiful in chastising blood-traitors at school, so quick to catch a runaway Mudblood... I am proud to call you my nephew, Draco, very proud indeed.”

“Thanks, Aunt Bella.” Draco followed her from the vault. “You don't exactly give the family a bad name yourself.”

*Evil, maybe. Twisted and sadistic. Murderous, bloodthirsty, and devoted to a certain Dark wizard in a way that makes me want to gag if I think about it for too long. But not bad.*

*Bad simply doesn't cover enough territory to describe you.*

“Ah, now I remember.” Aunt Bella stopped with one hand on the cart. “There is one thing I wanted to ask you, Draco...”

“Yes?” Draco said, folding his arms casually to cover the telltale lump of cup along his left side. *Don't panic, she didn't notice, she can't have seen anything, this isn't all about to end badly...*

“What is this story I was hearing from Severus and Amycus about you and little Longbottom?”

“Oh, that!” Draco laughed aloud in relief. “That was yesterday, in Dark Arts! Longbottom was being his usual poncy self, going on about how good and kind Muggles are, and how purebloods shouldn't ‘put on airs’ just because they have wizarding ancestors...” He rolled his eyes. “His usual cant. Anyway, I got sick of it. Caught him in the hall after class with a Leg-Locker, and made him tell me I could have an ancestral treasure of his family before I'd let him up.” A wicked grin. “And I made sure my wand was pointing just where he didn't want it to be.”

The chained dragon, at the end of the hall, flinched back a bit more from Bellatrix's shriek of laughter.

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*Probably wasn't necessary, but I like to cover all my hoops. Just in case there was any lingering magic about this thing that would have marked me as a thief, I got permission from its rightful owner to take it, so now it doesn't count as stealing. And it gave me another bit of credit as the perfect little Death Eater, that's always good...*

Turning the final corner, Draco began to pace back and forth in front of the familiar tapestry of trolls in tutus. “I want the place where everything is hidden,” he murmured to himself, picturing the room.

*Looks a bit like Aunt Bella's vault, actually. If broken and stained and contraband everything under the sun were as valuable as gold and jewels and armor.*

*And one very, very special little cup.*

The door materialized in the opposite wall. Draco crossed to it, pulled it open, and shut it quickly behind himself.

*Which was in the one until today, but shall now reside in the other, alongside something much like itself...*

He located the preposterous setup of bust, wig, and diadem he'd seen in the TVP without much trouble, and opened the acid-stained cabinet on which the bust was perched. “Time to put a cup in a cupboard, I think,” he said, winking at the observers he knew were there.

As the door swung wide, the dim light of the Room of Hidden Things fell on something within.

“Hello, what might you be?” Draco drew it out. It was a copy of Advanced Potion-Making, its corners a bit battered, likely from being knocked around in a schoolbag for a year. “Wonder who left you behind?” He glanced up at the pockmarked warlock with his ridiculous headgear, suddenly seeing the tower of objects in a new light. “And marked you so nicely, to be sure they

could find you again. Might be a name inside the cover...”

He flipped it open to look.

---

Professor Trelawney sighed as she passed through a familiar stretch of corridor. “First whooping, now laughing,” she said, shaking her head. “I simply must find another way downstairs—this hallway has no respect at all for the proper silence which should be observed in the presence of one who can part the mystic veils...”

## Be Careful 46: What You Destroy

“So why don't you just destroy them, then?” Hermione asked, watching the image of Draco setting Hufflepuff's cup inside the cupboard which was marked by Ravenclaw's diadem.

“With what?” Draco inquired, balancing his wand on one finger. “You've read the same books I have—there are only three proven ways to destroy a Horcrux. All the rest are unsubstantiated stories, one-offs, and I'm not about to try anything I'm not certain of. Especially not magic that might well be beyond my level.”

“What are the sure ways, then?” said Ginny.

Draco ticked them off on his fingers. “Basilisk venom, Fiendfyre, and a potion called Animattero. Which I'm not about to attempt making, not when it requires five months of constant boiling, eats through a cauldron a month, and is so volatile it'll blow up everything for twenty yards if a drop of it gets into the fire.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” said Harry. “So that leaves you with two. Could Sangre do something about the venom?”

Ray shook his head, taking his hand away from the TVP and making the image disappear. “Those caps on her fangs are permanent. Her idea, to make sure no one could ever use her to hurt people again. If we'd known another version of me would show up from another world in fifty-odd years and need her venom, I'm sure we'd have done it differently,” he added to Draco.

“Thanks.” Draco tossed his wand into the air and caught it again. “As for my side, the basilisk's dead there, and unlike some people, I'm no Parselmouth, so I've got no way into the Chamber.” *And I doubt it's anything like what it is here—basically a second Great Hall, one they only use for special occasions like Halloween, where they can shut off all the lights and have Sangre tell scary stories with Professor Riddle translating...*

“I've been a little worried about that,” said Hermione. “Harry, your Harry, he shouldn't be able to speak Parseltongue like he does. That, and the connection between him and Voldemort...” She shook her head. “I just have a feeling it's not good.”

“I thought it was Abby who was the Seer in your family,” Ron teased, rubbing Hermione's shoulders. “Her and your mum. So what's the third one, Draco? Fiendfyre, did you call it?”

“Yeah.” Draco grinned. “And here's irony for you—we've just covered it in Dark Arts. It's a cursed fire, not terribly hard to call up, but unless you catch it within about thirty seconds with this specific counterspell that turns it into ordinary fire, there's no way to stop it until it burns out on its own.”

“No way at all?” Harry said idly, swirling a finger and creating a curlicue of flame in midair.

“Yes, well, I can't do that either, and I'm fairly sure neither can Potter.”

“Which is a bit odd,” said Ginny. “If Harry's the Heir in this world, why wouldn't he be in yours?”

“He might be,” said Harry, snuffing his spiral with a waved hand. “He just may not know about it. How old was he when his parents died, Draco?”

“A year and a bit. Why?”

“Tradition in our family.” Harry sketched a knot design that looked like an eight-petaled flower. “Babies get their powers bound at birth, so they don't go around setting the furniture on fire if they don't like what's for dinner. The unbinding ceremony's usually at about age seven, but it depends on the kid. Since his parents died before he was two, he might still have the powers, but bound. Or it could be another thing like you and Ray, and he's not the Heir at all.”

“You two look alike, though,” Meghan said. “If I could meet him, touch him, I'd be able to tell for sure...”

“I'm not taking you back with me,” Draco cautioned. “You're just going to have to stay curious. Forever.”

“And I'm not even a cat.” Meghan rolled over on her back and pretended to bat at a piece of string. Neville pulled a dried vine from his pocket and lowered it down for her.

“About the venom thing,” said Ron. “The day I left, the other me, they figured out Gryffindor's sword had venom in it, didn't they? So if you could get hold of that, the real one, wherever it is...”

“And therein lies the problem,” said Hermione, squirming to reposition Ron's hands. “We don't know where it is, we don't know who does know, and we can't go looking for it from here, because a sword doesn't have a soul.”

“Perhaps Professor Dumbledore could look,” Luna said. “He was most likely the one who made the copy in Draco's world, so if he looked back in time, he might be able to see what was done with it.”

“Trouble is, we haven't even got a time frame to work with.” Ray flexed his fingers. “It could have been any time between end of second year and end of sixth. That's a lot of ground to cover. I think we may just have to wait and see on this one.”

“Wait and see works for me... hey, that rhymed.” Draco leaned back into the sun. “I’m a poet.”

“And didn't know it,” chorused three or four people.

“How is your Animagus work coming, Draco?” Luna asked. “I know you don't care for Transfiguration, but it has to be easier for you than it is for the younger students, because you've learned more about it already.”

Draco nodded without opening his eyes, which he'd closed against the direct light. “Going faster than I thought it would,” he said. “Helps that I studied Latin when I was younger. I've almost got my incantation done already. The partial transfigurations are taking a while, but Professor McGonagall said I ought to be done by Easter holidays if not sooner.”

“Speaking of holidays,” said Hermione. “We were going to do Peter Pan for our family pantomime this year. Did you want a part?”

“I don't know, what's the story about?”

“Well, there's a boy who never grows up, except the part is always played by a girl, and he lives in a place called Never Land...”

*Half-listening to the story, Draco let his mind roam free. Hogwarts tried to do a pantomime of The Fountain of Fair Fortune once, but everything went wrong and there's been a ban on shows at the school ever since. Which is a shame, considering how much fun we had with Pirates. Maybe it's only magical shows that are jinxed...*

*Lucius always hated that story. Probably because it's got a witch going off with a Muggle. I wonder how he'd do here, where they're looking into a law to make any other kind of marriage than that illegal?*

*He amused himself for a few moments, imagining his blood father transported into this world. He'd probably try to throw Moony and Danger out of the Manor. And the Manor would throw him out instead, and serve him right. Then he'd go looking for the rest of his buddies, and find out that they're all either dead, or nothing like he expects them to be. Vince and Greg flitted across his mind, chatting with the rest of the House at meals, sitting out in the courtyard with their friends on breaks, raising their hands in class. And if he managed to catch up with me, and see who I hang around with...*

*Well, let's just say I'd enjoy seeing his face. As long as I was sure he couldn't reach me afterwards.*

*The imagining spread, until he had several of the Death Eaters pictured against the background of the world where he was currently basking in the sun. None of them fit very well, for which he was grateful.*

*Though Aunt Bella did have a counterpart here. Mum and Aunt Andy had a big sister named*

*Isabelle. Operative word, had—she's dead, she died in the Troubles, which I've finally learned more about now...*

Though he was fairly sure it was his random answers on the History of Magic exam which had put him in a beginner-level class, Draco thought he might have placed there even if he'd tried. The history being taught was quite different from his own world's, and he occasionally wondered how much of that was due to actual differences and how much to pressure from purebloods in his own world to teach what “should have” happened, instead of what actually had.

*But let's be fair, Binns didn't need any help to make us all forget everything he'd said ten seconds after he'd said it. And I'm no Neenie, to go looking for my own answers. History never concerned me overmuch—it was in the past, over and done with, who cared about it?*

Except that now he did, inasmuch as learning about the past helped him understand why this present was different than his own.

*So, the Troubles. They were what Mum called them, the “last hurrah” of the wizards who'd fought tooth and nail against the repealing of the Code of Secrecy for reasons of their own. After all, if Muggles don't know there's such a thing as magic, they can't turn you in for using it on them...*

Several things that had puzzled him about this world dated to the Troubles. Neville's father, of course, had died in them, defending a Muggle family from three Blood Purists—and I probably could have told you it was Isabelle and Rudolph and Bastable Lestrangle who did it, too, if I'd had to. He took the brothers with him, though, and this world's version of dear Auntie Bella died in hospital before she could go on trial...

However, the absence of Rubeus Hagrid from this Hogwarts could also be traced to the Troubles, though it was for a happier reason.

*Since there was never the whole Chamber of Secrets flap here, he finished his training, went to work for Regulation and Control, and was part of a team sent out to help deal with an infestation of acromantulae in France that were preying on Muggles... met a teacher from Beauxbatons, name of Olympe Maxime, and it was love at first enormous sight... he's been there ever since, and apparently his accent in French is just as bloody awful as it is in English... they said he might come over for a look-in around Christmas, might even bring his kids...*

The thought of Christmas sent Draco's mind in several directions at once. Danger's baby was due around Christmas, they'd finally know if the seventh little Beauvoi was a boy or a girl—he rather thought he did want a spot in the Beauvoi family pantomime, especially as he had a good guess who would be taking the lead role as Peter Pan—Moony was hoping for a breakthrough in his “bitter wards” technique in time for the holidays so that everyone could go home for them...

*Hogwarts is nice, but there's no place like home for the holidays.*

Predictably, “home” fragmented his thoughts still further. There were his two Manor homes, one seeming far more real than the other, and his two homes at Hogwarts, again with one rather more

solid in his mind—

*Glad Ray thought up that little trick with my bedcurtains. I'd be confused every morning without it.*

After an embarrassing incident in which Draco had nearly hexed Greg through the far wall of the dorm, Ray had suggested Draco sew a strip of bright yellow cloth all around the inside of the curtains of his four-poster in Ray's own world, so that he'd know the instant he woke up which world he was in.

*‘Course, his first two suggestions were red, for Abby, and blue, for...*

Draco shook his head hard, dismissing that suggestion. *He's wrong. We may be counterparts, but that doesn't mean we have to like the same girl!*

Though Luna, his own world's Luna, was awfully cute in a pixie-ish sort of way, and she'd been a far better sport about his taunting than he'd expected. It was almost as if she suspected, as if she knew, that he'd changed his mind about her and her friends, that he didn't really want to hurt them anymore, that he was more on their side than not these days...

*She said that stuff in the Forest when she had her detention. It was as if she knew I was there. And right at the end, she said she wouldn't mind if the somni-thing—me—if I came back another time...*

“No,” Draco muttered aloud, trying to get the idea to go away. “No. Not happening.”

*Ray claims I tease her because I like her. Fat lot he knows. I've just been teasing her because she isn't getting herself into trouble enough for me to keep up appearances with her any other way. Longbottom and Weasley and the rest of the Gryffindors, and even some of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, they're getting themselves detentions at a fine old rate—I can barely keep up with all of them—but not her. Not Luna.*

*Such a smart girl, she is...*

“Stop that.” Draco pounded the heel of his hand into his forehead. “Stop. Now. Stop.”

“Who are you talking to?” said Neville, looking over at him.

“Myself.”

“Are you listening?”

“I don't think so.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“Thanks,” Draco said, or thought he did. The word was drowned out by a rising scream, as if a

banshee had invaded the castle—everyone else shot upright, their eyes wide and wands in their hands instantly—

*What is that?*

The sound cut off just as abruptly as it had started. “Come on,” Ray said, waving towards the door. “Mustering point.”

“What's wrong?” Draco asked, pulling out his own wand and following his friends into the hall.

“That's the alarm for the wards starting to fail,” said Harry grimly. “It might be just a drill, but we have to treat every incident like it's real. Slacking off is how you get Kissed... or how your friends do.”

Draco nodded, attempting not to swallow visibly.

*If Hogwarts' wards fail... will there be any place left safe?*

---

They took turns approaching the sweet-burning barrier. The living one who tasted like them shielded them from the burning, so that it was merely sweet, and they drank deeply of that sweetness.

Soon the barrier would be gone. They would be able to enter the forbidden place and find the food they were so often denied. It would be an epic feast, remembered forever by both those who fed and those who were born into the dark life from it.

Just so long, after all, did their kind live.

## Be Careful 47: Who You Choose To Save

“The ships have been pre-flighted,” announced Professor McGonagall from the top of the staircase in the entrance hall. “We have a good quarter of the students loaded already, along with all the littler ones. Including those who are being obdurate, and with whom we could use some help.”

This last was patently directed at Danger, who had just emerged from the corridor which led to the kitchens. “Dragon again?” she asked with a sigh.

Professor McGonagall nodded.

“Mitsy, would you mind?” Danger said to the house-elf beside her. “I'd rather not climb all those stairs in this condition if I can help it.”

The house-elf caught Danger's hand in her own, and both of them disappeared with a pop.

“That looks like something I should remember,” Draco said to Ray, following his counterpart out the front doors. “Not only can house-elves Apparate at Hogwarts, they can Side-Along.”

“They're accurate, too. Put you down within six inches of where you wanted to be.” Ray squinted into the twilit distance, pulling his cloak closer around himself. “Oh, that's not good, that's not good at all...”

“What isn't?” Draco peered in that direction as well, but saw nothing except the rippling air that often happened in the summer when a piece of ground overheated...

*But it's nearly December. It's cold out here. That can't be heat haze.*

He looked again and felt his heart sink. *And it's not.*

*It's whatever you call it when so many dementors get together in one place that they start affecting the local weather patterns.*

“Personally,” said Ray, heading for the slightly tumbledown cabin on the outskirts of the Forest, “I think I'll just call it ‘oh damn we're in a lot of trouble now’.”

“Sounds like a good name to me.” Draco made a private resolution to stop thinking so loud. “Is this the mustering point, then?”

“What do you think?” Ray waved to the crowd of students and teachers standing around the cabin, looking around them nervously, some fingering their wands, others with their eyes closed to recall happy memories.

“I think yes, but I also think I could be wrong. That's a hobby of mine, you know.”

“Being wrong is a hobby of yours?”

Draco shrugged. “What can I say. Comes with being born on the Dark side.”

Ray snickered. “Do you have cookies?”

“What?”

“Never mind, Muggle joke. I'll explain later. Come on, the assignments draw is on the front steps...”

---

She giggled to herself as she dabbled her fingers in the bowl of water. The fools were so simple, so trusting! They left their equipment where people could get at it, and they trusted that no one would tamper with it!

*No one ever made that mistake with me twice.*

The image in the bowl cleared, showing the pale-blond boy stepping up to pull a slip of paper from the rapidly rotating drum. Her giggles escalated madly as a black-haired man standing nearby compared his slip to the boy's.

*Yes indeed, what a great coincidence that this pair is joined for their work. And what a greater coincidence it will be when another pair joins them...*

---

Dragon sat in a corner and pouted.

*I am not being ob-whatever-Cousin-Minerva-said. I just don't want to stay on this stupid little ship. Dragons can fly on their own—they don't need ships to keep them safe from dementors—*

*So why don't I go down to the grounds and help the grownups? They'll be glad to have a big strong dragon there!*

He waited until his mum and Myrtle were both looking the other way. Then he slipped out the door.

*I'm Dragon Charlie. I can do anything.*

*Even be my own Patronus and chase those nasty dementors away.*

Light-footed, he tiptoed down the halls, headed for the secret passages. There were a pair that went straight up and down from the entrance hall. They were the quickest. He'd be down on the grounds before anybody noticed he was gone.

*Nobody fear. The Dragon is here.*

*And maybe I can find Draco. Two dragons are better than one.*

He trotted out the door into the fading light.

---

Abby, chattering away with her friends, suddenly gasped as a picture flashed onto one lens of Gina's glasses.

“Mother!” she cried, spinning around. “Mother, where's—”

Her mother was gone. Myrtle, across the room changing a baby's nappy, looked up at the cry. “She had to go down to the doors, dear,” she called. “To help manage the crowd. I'm sure she'll be back in a moment.”

*A moment isn't fast enough—Dragon's out there and no one knows it—*

“Did you See?” Gina asked in a whisper as Abby turned back with a growl of frustration. “Is it something bad? Does someone get Kissed?”

“Not if I can help it,” Abby said, starting for a seemingly innocuous wall panel.

She knew the secret passages of Hogwarts as well as would be expected for the child of a Marauder and an Heir.

Her little brother was not going to get away with this.

---

*Of all the students and all the otherworld professors to get all the ward assignments... Draco frowned. He knew he was fracturing the quotation, but it didn't make even the little sense that a usual quote-mash should.*

*Whatever. I find it highly ironic that I've been assigned watch-duty with him.*

Professor Severus Snape was rolling his shoulders, one after the other, apparently getting loosened up for Patronus-casting. He'd barely acknowledged Draco when they'd found they had the same assignment, and hadn't spoken a word since then.

Draco gave the man a half-contemptuous look. *There is no way in hell you are good enough for my mum. Especially not when you won't acknowledge she exists. I understand she's not your One Great True Love, but come on, man, you don't even have the excuse my Headmaster does, that your*

*One Great True Love is dead! She just picked somebody else, and they look awfully happy together—*

He snorted to himself. *Wonder if it bothers him that he has to teach their kid in Potions. Make that kids, Lyssa tested into the advanced section, didn't she? And she looks just like her mum...*

A loud cough broke him out of fantasies which were on the verge of turning into graphic nightmares. “Yes, sir?”

“The boundaries of our section are clearly marked in silver,” Professor Snape informed him without preamble. “Walk until you reach the mark, then return to this spot. Cast a Patronus at any disturbance. Call if you are overwhelmed.”

“Yes, sir.” Draco turned to his duties, his mind still gnawing on the apparently unsolvable problem.

*Mum wants him. He wants Harry's mum. Harry's mum and dad are perfectly happy together. Unless a couple people turn into somebody else, or one of them changes their mind, I can't see how this can come out well...*

Beside him, the wards rippled.

“Expecto patronum,” Draco whispered, thinking of the rush of giddiness he'd felt when he'd realized the book in his hands, full of marginalia in his Headmaster's handwriting, was the answer to how Harry Potter had suddenly become a master potioneer the year before.

The silver bird erupted from the end of his wand. Draco twitched it, bringing the creature back towards himself. “What are you?” he murmured, holding out his wrist. “Come on, perch for me, let me get a look at you...”

The bird obediently perched.

Draco looked, and felt his stomach sink.

The bird began to flicker.

“Oh no you don't!” Draco tossed the bird (he knew what it was now, but didn't want to tempt fate by even thinking it out loud) into the air and concentrated with all his might on happy thoughts, happy memories.

*Trying out for Quidditch just for the hell of it, thinking there was no way I could break into an established team, and then finding out each House fields three full teams apiece, plus a Fun Team that's just out there to do tricks and make the little kids laugh, except that every now and again they actually win a game, and one year the Hufflepuff Fun Team went all the way and took the cup...*

He'd qualified for the second-tier Slytherin team; their first game was in two days, against the

third-tier Ravenclaws. Idly he wondered how Ray and Luna sorted things out when their Houses had to play against one another in Quidditch...

*And there I am, back on the topic I didn't want to be on.* Draco continued walking his section of ward, his Patronus soaring overhead. *Luna Lovegood—the one from the world I was born in—the one I think I'm—*

He stopped himself before he could even think it. The Patronus was bad enough. If he let himself think it, he'd be lost.

*She's got a life of her own. A dad. Friends. Quests for weird animals and things like that. She'd have to be crazy to give it all up to get interested in me.*

He carefully censored the thought which was trying to point out something about Luna's general level of sanity.

*She plays along with my little games either because she doesn't realize I'm being mean to her, or because she doesn't want to get hurt. That's all. That's the only reason she does it. It does not, it cannot mean anything else. I won't let it. And I don't even know if her form is the same as Ray's Luna, which means it could be totally meaningless that my Patronus takes the shape of—*

“Draco!” shouted an exuberant small boy's voice. “I knew I could find you!”

Draco whirled. “Dragon? What are you doing down here?”

“I came to help!” the five-year-old proclaimed proudly. “Because dragons are strong against dementors!”

“Dragons are going to get themselves spanked if your mum finds out about this.” Draco scooped the boy up in his left arm. “Hold still, now, I have to tell Professor Snape where I'm going, and then we'll get you back to the castle—you really shouldn't be out here—”

“Charlie!” shouted a frantic girl's voice.

“Regular little family reunion here.” Draco sighed as Abby pelted into view. “Abby, go back to the castle—I'll take care of Dragon, you run back before they launch the ships without you—”

---

She peered eagerly into her bowl.

*Perfect. Perfect. The two brats who control it all, along with another half-breed abomination. Such disgrace to a line that once was great... She shuddered. But no matter now. Get rid of them and the prophecy is void, and my little friends can move in and do what they do best without hindrance...*

An insultingly lazy flick of a wand collapsed the wards at their weakest point, directly behind the

children's backs.

---

Draco froze in place as the air around him went icy cold. Abby whimpered once and darted to him, throwing her arms around him and holding on. Dragon stiffened and buried his face in Draco's shoulder.

*I need you back now*, Draco thought towards his Patronus, which drifted down with lazy grace to fly circles around the three of them. *That's good, just keep that up...*

But what he could see by the light the silvery owl cast was not conducive to maintaining her for longer than a few more moments.

The wards had been breached. Dementors glided through at a steady rate of two a second. A few of them were moving out onto the grounds, but far, far more of them were crowding around Draco, Abby, and Dragon, their rasping breaths seeming to suck light and hope out of the world, until Draco's flickering Patronus was the only source of either.

*If it goes out and I can't get it back, I'll kill them before I let them be Kissed.* Draco tightened his grip on Dragon and hooked his wand arm around Abby's head, keeping her face pressed against his side. *Bad enough just to have their souls be lost—a million times worse now that I know what actually happens—*

He glared out at the dementors. *These two are mine. You can't have them. Not as long as I stand here.*

But his chest was tight from the cold, his legs didn't want to keep holding him upright, and his Patronus was flickering worse and worse as the effects of so many dementors in one place made themselves known—

“Boy!” shouted Snape's hoarse voice from somewhere nearby. “Do you have Defense with Riddle?”

*What does that have to do with anything?* “Yes—do you think you could—”

“Did he give you the lesson on how to kill dementors?”

“Yes—but I don't see what—”

“Do you remember the incantation?”

“Yes, but—”

“That owl's about to go out, boy, I can see that,” Snape cut him off. “And I can't guard myself and get to you three in time.”

Understanding caught up with Draco at last, and his owl vanished as he went to one knee in shock.

*He can't be about to—*

“Get ready!” Snape shouted, and a great feline Patronus, stripes of brighter silver down its flanks, charged between the dementors, who fell back before it. Draco gasped in a grateful breath as it circled him closely, swiping insubstantial claws at encroaching black robes. Then he lifted his head and looked down the aisle the silver tiger had opened.

Snape stared back at him, his expression unreadable as the dementors closed in. “Don't miss,” he spat, just as a gray hand closed around his throat.

Shivering harder than he'd known was possible, Draco lifted his wand.

## Be Careful 48: How You Escape

The dementor's hand around Snape's throat held him upright as he went limp. The other hand went to its hood and lowered it, revealing the eyeless face and greedy mouth, just as terrifying as Draco recalled them from Fidelus Manor. He held Abby more firmly against his side as she tried to look up and thanked his lucky stars Dragon wasn't trying to break free as well. The tiger Patronus was still circling them, but it was beginning to waver, its edges to degrade, the cold was starting to seep back through—

*I might be able to recast mine and knock it away from him, get us over to him, hold until someone shows up to help us—*

The dementor leaned forward and fastened its mouth over Snape's.

*Or not.*

All sound stopped, as if the other dementors were holding their breaths. Snape convulsed, his arms and legs jerking wildly, as the dementor Kissing him slid its free arm around him and lifted him from the ground in a horrific parody of a lovers' embrace. The tiger Patronus froze where it stood, twitching much as its caster was.

*Mum's not going to like this—*

Snape gave one final shudder and was still, dangling in the dementor's embrace like some gigantic doll. His Patronus vanished like a blown-out candle flame. The dementor dropped him unceremoniously to the ground, then lifted its head, seeming to look up at the blank sky above it.

Draco blinked. Was he really seeing—

*It's got light around it. Just a tiny bit, but light. Silver—like a Patronus—*

He recalled in that instant what he had to do. Clinging to the thought of his mum and the reality of the two children beside him, he aimed his wand and prayed he wasn't too late.

“Expecto patronum emeritum!” he shouted in a cracked, shaking voice.

Nothing.

Draco swore inwardly, shook his wand, but nothing emerged, not even a drop of mist, and his shout had reminded the dementors he was there, they were turning to look at him—in a second they would be breathing again, and the cold and the terror would roll out of them, and he would fall before their power—he and Abby and Dragon would all be Kissed, Kissed as Snape had been—Snape, who had been loved so desperately by his mum her entire life long—

*It'll kill her. Knowing he's a dementor now, knowing I am, it'll kill her. Or make her walk outside at night and join us, it's the sort of crazy-stupid thing she'd do. And she wouldn't be alone, not if this story ever got back to my world, I know someone else who'd do the same thing if she felt the same way I do about her—*

After all, if he was going to spend an eternity hunting down and destroying love, he might as well admit it to himself in his last few seconds human.

*I've fallen in love with Luna. My world's Luna. I love her, I want to save her, but I'll never get the chance now, I can't even save myself—*

*Or can I?*

Draco lifted his head. The lead dementor was nearly on him, still glowing ever so faintly with its silver light.

*Silver. Luna thinks my eyes look like silver, I heard her tell Weasley so the other day, and try to convince her that meant I had to be good because silver is an ingredient in a lot of antidotes—she defends me every time Weasley and Longbottom run me down, even if she does it in weird ways, she's still doing it—she isn't just playing along with me to save her skin, she's playing along to help me, because she knows I've changed, and because she thinks it's fun—*

Draco shoved himself to his feet, bringing Abby with him, clutching Dragon tighter than ever.

*You can't have me.*

*Not when there's a chance the girl I love might love me back.*

“Expecto patronum emeritum!”

The silver owl shot forward from the tip of Draco's wand and swooped through the outlined dementor before him. The dementor threw its head back in a silent scream, then just as silently exploded, fragments of blackness shooting outward in all directions. The other dementors retreated instantly, but did not break their ring.

*Damn it, we still can't get back to the castle—*

The thought he'd used to conjure the Patronus slipped back into Draco's mind, as the Patronus herself turned on a wingtip and flew back through the silver light, which had not disappeared when the dementor had been destroyed.

*We can't get back to this castle. But I brought Luna here with me that one night, just by touching her.*

*Why can't I take Abby and Dragon back with me and get inside the castle there?*

His wand was already moving, roping his Dragon-holding hand together with one of Abby's, conjuring a bit of plaster over one of Dragon's hands where it touched his back. "It's all right now," he murmured to them, feeling Abby shivering against him, hearing Dragon's little whimpers as he burrowed closer to Draco. "I'm going to get you somewhere safe—it'll take a little while, but we'll make it—"

The silver light, around which Draco's Patronus was now flying, had coalesced into the shape of a man. Neither ghost nor memory-figure, Professor Severus Snape stood one last time on the grounds of Hogwarts, looking at Draco with approval.

"Tell them I made my choice," he said in a voice that echoed about inside Draco's head, and then he was gone, all at once as though he had Disapparated, though not even Disapparition was that quick or that—final was the word Draco settled on—

The bits of darkness all about, the pieces of what had once been a dementor, were beginning to shimmer. Draco's owl flew to one of them and brushed it with her wing, and it burst into vibrant light, drawing the three nearest pieces to itself, where they began to glow as well. The dementors drew back even further.

*But they won't stay back. As soon as whoever that used to be comes together and goes wherever he, or she, is headed, they'll be on us again. We need to be out of here by then. And getting into dream-state takes a minute or two after falling asleep—we won't have that kind of time...*

*Good thing Mum helped me find that Dreams-Without-Sleep Spell a few weeks back.*

*I'd better make these two actually sleep, though. That way, if it doesn't work and we're Kissed, they'll never know about it.*

He touched his wand to Dragon's head. "Dormio." The little boy grew heavier in his arms, and Draco went to one knee, then repeated the spell on Abby, who crumpled across his upheld leg. Carefully, he lowered her to the ground beside him, then lay down, arranging Dragon on his chest.

*My turn.*

The soul of the former dementor flew together beside him, revealing a worn-looking witch with an astonished expression. Draco saluted her with his wand, then pointed it at himself.

"Alucino!"

Darkness streaked with light rushed over him as the witch lifted her arms to the heavens.

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From the tower window, an excellent view of Hogwarts grounds could be had, where they weren't obscured by fog. The person currently in possession of that view hated the fog. It was the sort brought along by dementors, and dementors did not belong at Hogwarts. Still, under the current rules, there they were, and there they would remain, until...

*Until it is all over. Until better times come.*

A sudden change caught the watcher's eye. In the center of one patch of grass near the edge of the grounds, where a moment before there had been nothing, there was now a dark blotch. It seemed an odd shape to be a human being...

*But could it be two? Or even three?*

Natural eyesight augmented by a quick spell, the watcher peered closer, and ascertained that it was, indeed, three human beings. One was a normal size for an adult, while the other two were smaller. The normal-sized one had very fair hair, silvery in the light of the moon overhead. The other two had hair that reminded the watcher of someone who ought to be at Hogwarts, but wasn't.

*They will need help. It would be too dangerous for me to go myself, but I can summon someone who can.*

*But I had best hurry. With so much fog, the dementors could be here any second...*

The watcher stepped away from the window to seek some privacy. This particular activity must be done alone.

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“Wake up! Wake up!”

Draco stirred. “Not asleep,” he mumbled, trying to remember what he'd been doing. He felt as if he were just emerging from a trance, or from being under the Imperius Curse. His left hand was stiff, a patch of skin on his right shoulder was uncomfortably warm, and his chest was weighted down, making it difficult to get a decent breath. Also, someone was shaking his right arm—someone with small hands and a familiar, if squeaky, voice—

“You must wake up now!”

The voice registered at last. “Dobby?” Draco opened one eye to see the clothed house-elf, looking frantic. “What's wrong?”

“The girl,” Dobby hissed, pointing past Draco, who levered himself up to see Abby lying asleep beside him, her right hand roped together with his left. “You must bring her closer, so that Dobby can touch her along with you and the boy—you must hurry, dementors are coming, patrolling the grounds—”

Draco swore and quickly pulled Abby towards himself, rolling her over in the process so that her

left arm flopped across her. Dobby leapt over him and seized Abby's left hand, then reached out towards Dragon, still asleep across Draco's chest—Draco laid a hand against the house-elf's smaller one as it touched Dragon's arm—

The familiar twisting compression of Apparition, and then they were in an empty classroom, behind rows of shrouded desks, Abby and Dragon both starting to rouse. Draco drew his wand and Vanished the rope holding him to Abby, then did the same for the sticking plaster he'd conjured over Dragon's left hand where it touched his right shoulder. Dobby had vanished again almost as soon as they'd materialized.

*God, that was awful, I never want to do anything like that ever again in my entire life...*

“Draco?” Abby's tentative voice cut into his thoughts. “Where are we?”

“Hogwarts.” Draco laid Dragon across his lap and helped Abby sit up. “My Hogwarts, not yours. We'll have to stay out of sight, people will start asking questions if they see you two, and I can think fast, but not that fast.”

Abby nodded, her face gray in the dim light. “Professor Snape,” she whispered. “Was he—”

“He didn't make it.” Draco braced against a brief wave of shivering. “I got the dementor, though.”

*I think, I hope, Snape was unconscious by the time it actually started—and once it was over, he looked all right, or as all right as he ever looks—so I can tell Mum he didn't suffer, or not much. That's important. She'll want to know.*

Dobby burst back into existence beside them, balancing a large tray with three steaming mugs on it. “You will need this,” he said importantly, setting it down. “Drink all of it, and do not be arguing, it is helping you.”

Abby reached eagerly for the mug the house-elf extended to her. “Thank you,” she whispered, sniffing the steam. “It smells wonderful, thank you so much...” Her voice trailed off as she gulped down a hasty mouthful. “Oh, it's delicious!” she breathed as soon as she could speak again. “Even with the nutmeg in it, just like Mother makes it...”

Dobby started in surprise, nearly dropping the second mug. “Who is this, then?” he asked Draco, who rescued his drink from the house-elf's hand before it could spill. “That she knows the secret ingredient?”

“I always wondered what you used to put in there.” Draco took a sip of his own hot cocoa. It did indeed have the same taste he remembered from snowy days in his childhood, the sort he had loved to spend catching snowflakes on his tongue from his broomstick. “As for who she is... that's a bit of a long story. Give me a second and I'll see if I can't shorten it up.” He prodded Dragon in the side. “Time to get up, you, you're putting my feet to sleep and there's chocolate.”

“Big Charlie says dragons shouldn't have chocolate,” Dragon muttered drowsily. “Says it's not good for them.”

“You've been transfigured into a human, remember?” said Draco, ignoring Abby's cocoa-y giggle. “So that means chocolate won't hurt you any more than it hurts your Uncle Sirius. And he eats enough of it.”

“Not as much as Father.” Dragon rolled over and sat up. “H'lo, Dobby.”

Dobby held out the third mug to the little boy, but his eyes were fixed on Draco, a distinctly questioning look inhabiting them.

“They're... relatives of mine,” Draco said after another few swigs of cocoa. “From pretty far away. And we've got to get back there as soon as we can.”

In the middle of his next drink, the truth of his words hit him.

*God, we really do have to get back—using that spell means this counts as a waking transit, the same as it does when I'm under Dreamless Sleep and go over in spirit form—that means time is running one-to-one, a minute here is a minute there, and they're going to break through those dementors any second and find Snape Kissed and us gone—*

He swallowed just in time to keep from choking. “I'm not lying,” he said to Dobby, who had adopted the same pose of skepticism he'd always used on a small boy who claimed he had no idea at all how the lamp had been broken, or how the table had fallen over, or how the huge hole had appeared in the floor...

*That one really wasn't my fault—Lucius thought he'd cleaned up all the slow-acting Vanishing Potion he'd spilled there a month ago, but he'd left a drop or two, and it did what it was supposed to do until that whole section caved in.*

Thoughts of his childhood mishaps brought a smile to Draco's face, and he cupped his hands around his mug, letting the residual heat soak through his chilled fingers. “They're part of the reason I've changed,” he said. “Abby especially, but my little Dragon too.”

Dobby nodded slowly. “Your mother was like that,” he volunteered. “Different before you was being born than she was after. Dobby knows they are not yours that way—” This, scornfully, in response to Draco's half-spluttered denial. “But you care for them. You care about them. That is what is changing you.”

Abby scooted close to Draco and put her free arm around him. “I love my Draco,” she said, her voice still shaky but getting better. “Even if his world is dark and scary and doesn't have Cousin Tom or Sangre in it anymore.”

Her words sent Draco's mind spinning back in time for a brief instant.

*“...dead there, and unlike some people...”*

“I’m not,” he murmured. “But you are. Both of you.”

“We are what?” said Dragon, looking up.

“Tell you in a second.” Draco took a large drink of his cocoa, then set it atop a nearby desk.  
“Dobby, do you think you can stay with Abby for a little while? Dragon and I need to go get something important before we go back home.”

## **Be Careful**

### **49: What Life You Live**

Draco ran into the entrance hall and stopped in his tracks.

*Looks like someone isn't quite as dead as she was supposed to be.*

A black-haired witch, her deep-set eyes burning with an insane gleam, cackled softly to herself where she knelt near the foot of the marble staircase. James Potter, Sirius Black, and Alice Lovegood stood around her, wands in their hands, fury in their faces. Clearly, they were only waiting for an excuse.

*Not going to be asking for a trip to your Gringotts vault, I don't think.*

*Just in case we were still wondering why the wards went down.*

Behind him, Draco half-heard the quiet exclamations of thankfulness as Abby and little Charlie ran to their parents' arms.

“—reminded me what came after ‘nunc et,’” Abby was saying to her mother, “and we said a decade together and then touched hands to share—”

“—when she was about Abby's age, only she was dead,” Dragon enthused to his father, “and I got to say ‘Open up’ all by myself—”

Isabelle Black leaned forward slightly, as though enthralled by what she could see. Draco turned his head to follow her line of sight.

At the other end of the hall, near the door to the kitchen corridor, lay the body of Severus Snape. Cecilia Black knelt beside him, weeping silently, as though her grief were too great to be expressed aloud. Andrea Tonks and Lily Potter stood behind her, as though they hoped to comfort her but feared to intrude on such pain.

Draco was about to start towards his mum when she lifted her head and rose to her feet, staring at her eldest sister. “Why?” she said, her quiet voice cutting clearly through the silence that filled the hall. “Why, Isabelle? What harm had he, or the children, ever done to you?”

“He—no harm in the world.” Isabelle rocked back and forth on her knees in time with her words. “I misjudged him. Thought he would be weak. Easily overwhelmed. Then perhaps my foolish

little sister could seek out someone more worthy of herself.”

“No man is more worthy than he,” Cecilia hissed. “If you knew him as I do—if you saw what he has done, what he has sacrificed—but no, you could never understand such things. Not though you lived a thousand years.”

“The children, now.” It was as if Isabelle had not heard her sister speak. “Two of them half-breeds, from both sides. How Slytherin would weep if he saw what this line of his descent has come to—a werewolf for an Heir and a Scumblood for his wife...”

*Not quite as catchy as Mudblood*, noted a detached portion of Draco's mind, *but it works*.

“But the third one. The strange one, the boy from another world.” Isabelle's rocking slowed and stopped, and her voice was level as she eyed Cecilia and Andrea. “You've held him. Healed him. Taken him as your own. Do you know the things he's done? The things he's capable of doing?”

“I know one thing he was not capable of doing,” Cecilia said calmly.

“Then know another.” Isabelle rose to her feet. The Aurors half-raised their wands, but she remained where she was, pointing at Snape's body. “He put his trust in your boy. ‘Don't miss,’ he said. And your precious child shivered and whimpered and never raised his wand until it was over and too late. Your darling Severus gave himself up for nothing, and he'll have eternity to know what a fool he was. If he can know anything at all.”

Draco bared his teeth, as his Animagus form might when confronted with its natural enemy. *Shut your lying mouth before I come over there and do it for you...*

“And then? When they began to close in on him, and he felt the fear taking him?” Isabelle cackled again, her laughter rising in wild glee. “He threw the children to them, pushed them out in front of him to be Kissed! He hoped to find an escape while my friends' attention was elsewhere! But with so many of them, and only two tiny souls to go around...” She shook her head, clicking her tongue sadly. “And to think you had such hopes for him. To think you believed he could be your prophecy child. Perhaps he was. But not all prophecies come true.”

“This one,” said Lily from behind Cecilia, “still may.” The eyes so like her daughter's flickered across Draco, and she flashed him a smile before looking back at Isabelle. “If Draco and the other children with him were Kissed, where are their bodies?”

“I Vanished them.” Isabelle tossed her hair back over her shoulder with a practiced flick of her head. “I would have done the same for dear Severus if I'd had the time. An act of mercy—his body will die soon in any case...”

“Actually, with a touch of magic to help it along, his body could easily live a year or more,” Andrea interrupted her elder sister. “He kept himself in good condition for having such a sedentary job, and the brain damage one often sees with Kiss victims is missing here. Likely because he went to it willingly.”

“And I have walked the grounds, Isabelle,” said Cecilia quietly. “I have tasted what was left behind. One person, and only one, was Kissed tonight, and his heart held no despair, for he knew his soul would fly free. As for my Draco...” A faint smile came to her face. “Once, perhaps, he would have consigned innocent children to hell on earth in a bid to save himself. But no one who would do such a thing would be able to destroy a dementor.”

“There lies the flaw in your argument!” Isabelle's finger stabbed the air in her youngest sister's direction. “How do you know Severus was not simply deluding himself, hoping for the impossible? How do you know you are not doing the same? How do you know—know, Cecilia, not believe—that your child, your Draco, is truly capable of conjuring a Warrior Patronus?”

Before he knew what he was doing, Draco had his wand in his hand again. “Expecto patronum emeritum!” he shouted, and the owl burst forth—Bella shrieked as it swooped down on her and flew through her as it had the dementor—

She collapsed to the ground, gasping, as the Warrior Patronus circled above her, then came to rest on its caster's upheld left wrist.

“Got any more lies you'd like to tell about me?” Draco asked, advancing to where she could see him easily. The same detached back corner of his mind which had earlier critiqued the mad witch's choice of words now noted that he must cut quite a dashing figure, wand in his hand, owl on his arm.

*Wonder how I'd look with the real thing?*

Small feet slapped the floor behind him, and Abby was by his side, her eyes half-shut as she looked down at Bella. Dragon Charlie poked his head around his sister and stuck out his tongue at the Dark witch. She hissed at him. He responded in kind.

“That will be quite enough of that,” said Moony from behind them, lifting Dragon off his feet. The little boy squeaked in surprise. “Be thankful your mother can't understand you, or she'd have you chewing a bar of soap.”

“Oh, I can usually get a fair idea through your ears, love.” Danger scowled at her youngest son. “And I agree with your father. That sort of language, Parseltongue or not, is absolutely unacceptable for someone your age...”

Draco tuned this out. Bella was staring at him. Up close, her resemblance to his mad aunt was even more pronounced.

*Maybe she didn't spend twelve-odd years in Azkaban, but considering she refers to dementors as “my friends”, I'd say she got about the same amount of exposure.*

“Something for you?” he inquired, putting his owl-holding arm around Abby.

“I watched you,” Bella said, pushing herself into a half-sitting position. “I watched you and

learned about you, everything that my friends could tell me, and everything I could scry for myself once they had brought me something of yours from the Manor. I saw your entire life, up to the night you failed in your great mission—the night you should have died for your failure—”

“And you can't understand why I'm different now?” Draco finished.

“I understand perfectly why you are different.” Bella cast a venomous glance down the hall towards her sisters. “What I cannot understand is how.”

“Neither can I,” Draco said frankly. “I can remember being that person, and I can feel what it's like to be me, but I'll be—” He glanced down at Abby and made a quick substitution. “—cursed if I know how the changeover happened.”

Abby looked up in time to meet his eyes, a tiny smile present on her face. “I know how,” she murmured.

“Of course you do.” Draco tossed his Patronus into the air, where she circled the hall twice and dissipated. “You know everything. Are you going to tell me?”

“It's from something she said.” Abby pointed to Bella, who was now being hoisted to her feet by Alice—apparently whatever the Aurors had been waiting for had arrived. “She said there was a night you should have died. I don't know when that was or why, and I don't want to. But I think she's more right than she knows. I think you did die that night.”

Draco slid two fingers of his right hand along the inside of his left wrist. “Feels like a pulse to me.”

“That isn't what I mean and you know it.” Abby scowled. “I mean the person you used to be, the one she was talking about—the one who would have let the dementors have me and Dragon to try to get away himself—that person died that night. And that meant you could be born. This new you.” She spread her arms. “And you found a new world to live in.”

“I'm not who I thought I was,” Draco murmured, remembering. “And I don't know who I am.”

*And Mum gave me somebody to be. Somebody worthwhile. Abby's helped me build on that base—so have Moony and Danger, Ray and Neenie, Harry and Ginny and Ron and everyone—*

*I'm not completely different. I still have plenty of the old me left. But the worst parts, I hope, are gone.*

*Which means there's room for new things.*

His eyes sought the point where his Patronus had disappeared.

“An interesting form for it,” remarked his mum's voice from beside him, startling him into a jump. “And a most interesting burst of emotion associated with its conjuration. Have you perhaps come to some decision you want to share with me?”

“A decision, yes, but I don't know if I want to share it. It is, or some old-fashioned part of me feels like it should be, a private matter.” Draco knew around the middle of the first sentence that the quelling tone he'd been trying for hadn't worked, but he finished what he was saying with it anyway. *Might as well get a laugh out of it.*

Mum chuckled. “It will be private between us,” she said. “And I will not bring it up unless you do.”

*Probably as good as I'm going to get.* “All right. I...” Draco glanced around the hall. No one was within earshot. “I think I'm in love, Mum. With Luna. My world's Luna. And from the way she's been acting, it's just possible...”

“That she sees through your mask to the new person underneath it?” Mum finished for him. “And thinks he might be worth at least befriending?”

“I can only hope.” Draco drew his mind back to the present time and place. “So what happens now? Besides needing to find a new professor for the Advanced Potions classes?”

“I believe we shall wait and see.” Mum slid her arms around him and held him tightly. “And I shall tell you again that you have never yet disappointed me more than mildly, and that tonight I am more proud of you than I have words to say—” She broke off, looking down. “And just what do you have there?”

“Oh, that.” Draco patted the left pocket of his robes. “Well, it struck me that I had a couple little Parselmouths with me at my Hogwarts. Seemed like an opportunity I shouldn't waste. So I hid Dragon under my cloak and sneaked into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom—”

Mum raised an eyebrow. “Moaning Myrtle?”

“One of our ghosts. Long story. Anyway, Dragon opened the Chamber for me, and I conjured myself a rope to get down and back up...” Draco shook his head ruefully. “The tunnel was almost totally blocked by a rockfall. If I'd had someone else with me, we probably could have cleared it, but I was alone, so I had to Summon what I was after through a gap and hope for the best.” He reached into his pocket and produced what looked like a bundle of rags. “Only got one, and a little one at that, but it's better than nothing.”

“One what, exactly?” Mum asked with a hint of strained patience in her voice.

“Sorry. Thought I'd said. It's a basilisk fang.”

## Be Careful 50: Whom You Reassure

Draco flattened himself against the wall as Peeves swooped past, swathed in a long black robe and white mask. “Everybody expects the Hogwarts Inquisition!” the poltergeist bellowed. “Beware the soft cushions! Beware the comfy chair!”

“Gimme those back, you!” snarled Amycus, pelting by Draco in hot pursuit. “I can 'ave you thrown outta this castle!”

*Good luck. Teachers have been trying that for years. Draco smirked. Besides, Hogwarts wouldn't really be Hogwarts without Peeves. Just like the holidays wouldn't be the holidays without homework. I can't believe they start tomorrow—where did the term go?*

Draco allowed himself a small sigh of relief for getting through the fall without being caught out of character by anyone who mattered.

*Like I told Mum, I think Luna may suspect, but as long as she's willing to keep it all pushy-shovy in the halls, so am I. Even if I have started blushing every time I see her, just like the Weaslette used to do around Potter... at least I've learned to hide it a bit better than she ever did...*

*And Mum's going to help me work out a way I can talk to Luna without being caught over the holidays. Which are going to be amazing—I don't think Abby's shut up about Christmas since I mentioned we didn't have many traditions when I was growing up...*

Grinning at the prospect of two separate Christmases and two separate piles of presents, not to mention a whole new way to celebrate, Draco went on his way, cheerfully whistling the song that best described his life as it currently stood.

He did not see the dark figure which emerged from a cross-corridor and turned slowly to watch him go.

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Severus sat down at his desk, shaking his head. “Did you still want to be informed about odd behavior on the part of the Malfoy boy, Dumbledore?” he asked.

“Of course, Severus,” said the voice of Albus Dumbledore from behind him. “I do feel somewhat responsible for him, after the events of last summer.”

“He scarcely merits such attention,” Severus objected. “He may not be a killer, but he seems to have no trouble with the other two Unforgivables, or with random acts of violence in the hallways. And I do not like his obsession with Luna Lovegood.”

“I think Miss Lovegood can take care of herself, Severus. What has Draco done that would warrant your asking if I want to know about it?”

“Nothing terrible.” Severus turned to face Dumbledore's portrait. “But rather puzzling. The scion of the House of Malfoy, the Dark Lord's current favorite among the younger generation of Death Eaters, passed me in the hall a few moments ago whistling the Paradox Trio from *The Pirates of Penzance*. I cannot imagine where he could have learned it, unless he has been listening to one of those wireless programs which claims all achievements of culture are accomplished by wizards and Muggles merely steal them.”

Dumbledore nodded gravely, tapping his fingers against the side of his frame in a complex rhythm. “Interesting that it should be from the same production you described to me in September,” he said. “You had mentioned that one of the players had a look of Draco about him...”

Severus snorted. “Yes, and there was also a girl who favored Sirius Black's late Muggleborn paramour, and a male version of Hermione Granger to match the female. Not to mention that if confronted with a choice between appearing as a pirate in a musical show and being summarily executed, Draco Malfoy might well choose execution. I fail to see why you are interested in my impossible dreams.”

“Perhaps, Severus, it is because I can no longer dream,” Dumbledore said, seating himself. “And even impossible dreams can help to rest and relax the mind. But to business—Phineas, what luck in overhearing where they are, or in getting them to speak Ron Weasley's name aloud?”

Severus sat back, intending to listen to the portraits planning together, but his mind slipped back to the subject of dreams, to one he had experienced only a few weeks before...

---

The sound of a woman weeping, the muffled sobs of hopelessness, sent him across the courtyard and into the garden at a run. Her head snapped up as he rounded the corner, and she stared at him as a Muggle at a ghost. “How—” she breathed. “You cannot—I saw you—”

“I am here,” he told her, crossing to her swiftly and kneeling beside her, taking her into his arms. “Whatever you feared, my love, it has not happened. What is it? What could frighten you so?”

She clung to him, shaking. “May we postpone discussing it until I have had a few moments to comprehend that it was not real?” she whispered. “Or perhaps a few days, or weeks? Oh, Severus, Severus, I thought I had lost you forever...”

“Hush, my darling,” he murmured into her hair, stroking it with his free hand. “Hush, my Cecilia. I am here now. All is well.”

Ginny looked up from her book, frowning at the inside of the compartment door. “Luna's been gone for a while, hasn't she?” she asked.

Neville shrugged. “I thought girls always took longer about it than boys did.”

“That's because we usually go together. She's alone.” Ginny set the book aside. “I'm going to check on her.”

“I'll go with you. Not inside,” Neville added hastily. “Just...”

“I know what you mean.” Ginny smiled at him. “And thanks.”

Hands casually near their wands, the two Gryffindors walked down the length of the train car to the girls' toilet at its far end. Ginny listened at the door for a moment, then opened it and stepped inside. Neville leaned against the wall, trying to shake off the feeling that he was caught in a nightmare.

*Harry's out there, he reminded himself. He hasn't been caught. Neither has Ron. And Hermione escaped.* The Carrows hadn't been able to hush up the story entirely, not when Malfoy had been bragging on catching the Granger Mudblood and the reward he'd received for half of term.

*Neville clenched his teeth. I swear he plays with that stupid Galleon he got from Bellatrix in front of me on purpose. Flicking it into the air and catching it again, over and over, until I want to punch his pointy little nose. We understand already, Malfoy, your family's filthy rich on both sides, plus you're the ones in power now, so you can do anything you please...*

A strangled snarl from within the toilet interrupted his thoughts. Ginny, her freckles standing out starkly against her rage-pale face, shoved the door open so hard it crashed against its stops on the opposite wall. “Luna's gone,” she growled. “And look what I found on the floor.”

She held out her hand. Cradled in her palm was one of Luna's favorite dirigible plum earrings, half-crushed by the tread of a heavy boot.

Neville felt his stomach crumple inwards. “It's because of her dad,” he said, swallowing against a strong urge to be sick. “Because of what he's been writing in *The Quibbler*. They've taken her to get him to stop.” He met Ginny's eyes, certain that the frustrated fury in them mirrored his own. “She'll probably be in Azkaban by now.”

Ginny swore, an oath Neville was sure she'd learned from the twins. “Whoever took her had better hope they never meet me in a dark alley...”

She trailed off, and Neville could see her shoulders beginning to shake. “Dementors,” she whispered. “She'll have to listen to her mum dying over and over, and all the times she's been picked on—she really does mind it, you know, she hates it when people are mean to her, she just pretends that it doesn't bother her, when all the time it does—she'll have to keep living through

what Malfoy's been doing to her all term, and she won't ever be able to get away from it..."

Awkwardly, Neville put an arm around Ginny. "Luna's strong," he said, trying to convince himself with the words. "She'll get through it. And it won't be for very long. Only a couple months. Harry will come back, and we'll fight, and it will all be over."

*One way or another. Either we'll win... or we'll be dead.*

But this he did not say aloud. "We should tell the rest of the DA," he said instead. "Do you want to do it? It's still safe while we're on the train, the Trace won't go active until we get to King's Cross..."

"I know that," Ginny snapped. "I'm not a first year."

Neville looked away. "Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you." Ginny slipped the tiny red earring into her pocket. "I just can't help wishing..."

"Wishing what?"

"Lots of things." Digging her Galleon out as she went, Ginny led the way back to their compartment. "That there was never a You-Know-Who. That there was never a war. That we had a better idea what we were doing. That Harry were still here. That I could have..." She stopped and bit her lip.

"Gone with him?" Neville suggested, and glanced at Ginny's face from the corner of his eye. "Ginny, are the Slytherins bothering you again?"

"What do you mean again, they've never stopped." Ginny turned into their compartment and sank down on the seat, shivering. "They don't do anything," she murmured. "Not since Professor Snape gave them that lecture on proper respect for purebloods. But they hang around, and they look, and they leer, and they snicker, and they whisper about what they'd like to do, and they make sure it's just loud enough for me to hear it..."

Neville shut the compartment door firmly. "You're going home for the holidays," he reminded her. "You made it through fall term. Now you get to spend some time with your mum and dad, and your brothers, and have Christmas even if we are in the middle of a war. And when we come back for winter term, we'll keep on fighting. We're Gryffindors. It's what we do."

"Too brave to know when we're beaten," Ginny muttered, drawing her wand. "All right, help me figure out how to make this short enough to go all in one message..."

---

Unseen by anyone but his fellow portraits, Albus Dumbledore smiled in satisfaction. His quiet conversation with the only free and sober house-elf currently working at Hogwarts had gone far

better than he had believed possible.

*Perhaps my original plan in regards to a certain object of power can still be used. Suitably modified, of course. The happenings of today will be crucial—a moderating influence will be necessary if it is to work out...*

He glanced at the clock and nodded. *The Hogwarts Express will be in soon. The students will disembark and make their way to their homes.*

*And one will find something there he does not expect.*

---

Humming “The Twelve Days of Christmas” under his breath, Draco trotted up the front walk of Malfoy Manor. He was home, he would be hugging his mother in just a few moments, and enduring Lucius’ dutiful greetings...

*That's if he wants to see me at all. I don't think he likes me very much at the moment.*

He grinned to himself. *He'd like me even less if he knew I set him up to take the fall for Ollivander's and “Granger's” escape. Maybe I can tell him, just before I make my final jump. “Guess what, Father? I've been secretly working against you and the Dark Lord for nearly a year now, and I'm the reason he's about to fall.” Merlin's snow boots, that'd be satisfying...*

The door swung open at Draco's approach. He hurried inside, glad to be out of the cold.

Raucous laughter and shouts greeted him. Ten or twelve Death Eaters were grouped beside the stairs, shoving a smaller figure back and forth among them. Draco peered closer, recognizing the elder Crabbe and Goyle, Macnair, Dolohov, Greyback—the person being tossed about wore black robes like Draco's own, and had a great deal of dirty-blonde hair—

The feral werewolf gave his rasping laugh and hoisted the object of the game into the air at arm's length, smacking his lips. “I do hope your dad has a bit of backbone to him,” he said, hefting her as if testing her weight. “There's enough on you to share...”

Draco slammed his shoulder into Greyback, knocking the girl from the werewolf's grasp. Catching her wrist with his left hand, he pulled her behind him and drew his wand in the same breath. The other Death Eaters murmured as Greyback bent double, wheezing.

“Paws off, Fenrir,” Draco sneered in his best Malfoy tones. “And that goes for all of you,” he added, looking around the circle, making eye contact with every Death Eater present. “Keep away from this one.” He glanced over his shoulder into wondering blue-gray eyes. “She's mine.”

## Be Careful 51: Who You Tell Your Story

“Don't get cocky, boy,” Macnair warned, pushing forward. “You've had your reward for Granger —”

“What's the matter, want her for yourself?” Draco gave the mustached Death Eater the contemptuous up-and-down look that worked so well on uppity first years. “Bit young for you, isn't she?”

“It's not what she's here for—”

“So what is she here for?” Draco looked back at Luna again. She returned his gaze levelly. “Pressure on her kook of a dad to quit writing that muck about Potter, right? I should think he'll stop all the sooner once he knows I'm taking her in hand.”

“The Dark Lord left orders—”

“Not to put any more prisoners in the cellar,” Draco interrupted in a bored tone. “So she doesn't go to the cellar, she goes to my room. Which we already know works just fine as a lockup, even against someone who's got a wand. She doesn't have hers anymore—at least I'd assume you lot aren't thick enough to let her keep it—and I'll be making sure she doesn't have any little surprises up her sleeves. Or anywhere else on her.” He let his eye rove up and down Luna's figure, taking his time. “Personally.”

“But—” Macnair started to bluster.

“Pardon me, gentlemen, but it was a long ride back from Hogwarts and I'm sure Miss Lovegood's tired,” Draco cut in, using his best society tones. “Allow me to offer you the hospitality of our home, madam. If you'd be so good as to follow me.”

He turned and bounded onto the stairs, dragging Luna behind him—

*Though it's not really dragging when she's coming under her own power. Not as fast as I am, but I've got longer legs...*

The thought of legs, his own and Luna's, went in several directions at once, none of them anything he'd ever have dared to say in front of his mother, one or two he'd even have been embarrassed to admit to Ray and his other dormmates. By the time he turned into the first floor hallway, his face

was burning fit to light the way for him.

*You're not going to do that with her, any of it, he reminded himself sternly. No matter what you told those imbeciles back there, you're doing this to protect her, to keep her out of Azkaban or anywhere worse. Like one of their beds. They'd do it, too, as long as they could prove they weren't any danger to her being able to have kids someday—*

They started up the second staircase. Luna wasn't panting at all, Draco noticed absently, but of course the Ravenclaws lived in a tower like the Gryffindors did, so stairs must be second nature to her.

*She's not fighting. This impressed itself upon him suddenly as they neared the top of the stairs. She squirmed a bit at first, but since we got out of sight she hasn't even twisted her wrist. Weasley'd have me bleeding by now, and Granger would be burning a hole in the back of my head with her eyes, or possibly with my wand. But Luna—*

He resisted the urge to glance back at her once more. *Have to get her safe first. Get us both safe. Then I can explain. Not far now.* His bedroom was halfway down this hall, and he'd learned a useful little spell from the book Potter had stashed in the Room of Hiding that should keep them from being overheard. Ten more steps—five—two—

Draco shoved his own door open and flung Luna inside, sending her sprawling facedown across the bed. “Get used to that position,” he said loudly, stepping into the room after her. “You'll be using it a lot.”

Luna lifted her head and half-turned, looking at him through a curtain of hair without speaking.

*Maybe a bit too much, even for the sake of verisimilitude... but too late now. Have to go on from where I am.*

Draco slammed the door and locked it both with his wand and with the Manor's magic, then sent a burst of that same magic to infuse the window, setting a charm on it similar to one Ray had told him about. If anyone tried to spy on him through it, they would see precisely what they expected to see.

*Whatever that may be. And considering the favorite pastimes of some of the people around here, I'm not sure I want to know.*

A quick “Muffliato!” around the room made Luna's eyes widen more, and he wondered if Potter had taught it to her, or to someone else who had. She was sitting up now, stroking her hair back into place, watching him with curiosity but without fear. Her robes were torn and dirtied, and of her usual pair, only the left radish was in evidence. He wondered if that was an accident or not.

*Sounds like an opening line to me.*

“You're missing an earring.”

She touched her right ear. “Yes, I know. It fell out when they caught me in the toilet on the train.”

“You never made it home, then.” Draco slid his wand away.

“No. Daddy will be worried about me.” Luna drew her feet up onto the bed and crossed her legs. “More worried, when he hears what they say about who I'm with.”

“Yeah.” He put his back to the door and slid down it into a seat on the floor, staring at one of the bottom bedposts where it met the boards. “About that. I haven't actually dragged you up here to rape you or anything.”

“I know.”

He jerked his head up to meet her eyes. She was smiling. “You do?”

She nodded. “You made them all think that, just like you've made everyone at school think you hate us and enjoy hurting us. But no one you push down in the hall before their detentions can feel the curses people use on them, and I found the password to Professor Snape's office in one of my books the day you first stole my bag, and you weren't with the other Slytherins when they sneaked out to try to do something to Neville and Ginny and me when we had detention with Hagrid in the Forest. What were they going to do?”

“Try and get you eaten by acromantulas,” Draco said automatically, most of his mind still whirling. *She noticed about the Painless Potion—God, I hope no one else has, I could get in so much trouble for interfering with detentions—*

“I wouldn't have liked that much.” Luna began untangling a knot in her hair. “Daddy would have been upset about it too. Thank you for stopping them.”

“You're welcome—wait, how did you know—”

“And you even came out with us to make sure it worked,” Luna continued as if Draco hadn't spoken. “How did you get transfigured without forgetting who you were? Was it a potion?”

“No, it's an amulet, my mum gave it to me—I'd show you, but it's only got one more use and I think I might need it for something else—” Draco cut himself off forcibly. “Hold on a second. Are you telling me you knew that mongoose was me?”

“All I knew to start with was that you weren't just an animal.” The knot came undone. Luna moved a few strands back to another. “You could have been a Somnius, like I told Hagrid about, or a cappie—they're a bit like jarveys, but they only speak in languages that aren't the same as the one the humans speak in their country. But then you talked to me, and I recognized your voice.”

“I—you—” She had seemed to be answering his chattered comments, Draco recalled dimly. He had put it down to lucky guesses, but now that he thought about it, she'd been spookily accurate. “How did you hear me? I wasn't speaking aloud—I can't speak aloud when I'm transformed—”

Luna worked her fingers out of her hair and pulled up her left sleeve. Several small puncture scars marred the inside of her left forearm, grouped in a crescent-shaped curve. “I got this when I was nine,” she said, tracing it with a finger. “My mum was working on a new kind of scrying spell, and her bowl exploded. She pushed me down on the floor to try to protect me, but I got hit a little anyway. She got hit worse. It's how she died. But there was some of the potion she'd been using to scry on the shards that hit me—”

“And it got into your blood,” Draco finished, recognizing the story. “So now you're a Seer, more or less.”

Luna nodded. “I sometimes know things about people that they don't even know about themselves,” she said. “It doesn't always work, but it did for you. I knew as soon as I saw you on the train that you had changed. That you didn't think about me the same way you had before, or about anything.” She looked up, and her eyes caught Draco's as they had after the Opening Feast. “Why have you changed? What happened to you in between the Astronomy Tower and coming back to school?”

Draco opened his mouth, then closed it again. *I thought I'd be spending at least an hour convincing her I wasn't going to hurt her—I was so sure she'd be afraid of me, or at least uneasy around me, after everything I've done to her—*

*But no. She skips right over all that, accepts that I've changed without a qualm, and wants to know why. What am I going to tell her? I don't think “I've seen the error of my ways” will fly, but the truth is just a little bit unbelievable—*

He looked again at the girl sitting cross-legged on his bed.

*And since when has a story being unbelievable ever stopped Luna Lovegood from believing it? She might just be the only person alive today who'll take this whole bloody thing at face value. And let's face it, I could use a friend like that on this side of the worlds.*

*I could use a friend on this side of the worlds, full stop.*

*Might as well start at the beginning, then...*

“I made a wish,” he said.

---

Nearly an hour and a half later, Draco stood at the window, gazing out over the snow-covered grounds. He could see Luna's reflection in the glass; the blonde Ravenclaw was listening to him with her head tilted to one side, as though she were considering the truth of his words.

“...came through the door and saw you with them,” he finished, picking up the cup of water he'd got from the bathroom around the time he'd started talking about Pirates and draining it. “And I knew I had to move fast, because they wouldn't keep you down in our cellars after the escape, so that meant you must have just been brought here as a waypoint, and they'd take you away again if

I didn't grab you first..."

*And I'm babbling. Control, Draco, control.*

"So that's my story." Draco set the cup down on the inside sill of his window. "You're right. I have changed. I hope it's for the better. But one thing's sure." He focused on a spot at the sill's corner where the paint was starting to peel. "I'm through with hurting people for fun. So you don't have to be afraid of me." Kneeling down, he peered more closely at the spot, hoping his flaming cheeks weren't too apparent. "I won't do anything... inappropriate."

A moment of silence. Then bedsprings squeaked, and soft footsteps crossed the floor behind him. A hand touched his sleeve, fastened on it, pulled gently, bringing him around in an awkward shuffle.

Luna smiled down at him and pushed against his shoulder. Startled, Draco half-fell out of his upright kneeling pose, landing on one hip. Luna sat down on his legs, pinning him where he was, and matter-of-factly placed his arms on her shoulders, then slid her own around his neck.

"Not even if I want you to?" she breathed, and leaned forward.

Draco retained precisely enough presence of mind to tilt his head to accommodate her angle of attack, and to have one fully coherent thought.

*I guess she believes me.*

Then he lost himself in her lips, and her arms, and the soft fall of her hair over his hands, and the way she laid her face against his chest every time they broke off to hold one another close.

*If this is what being lost is like, may no one ever find me...*

## Be Careful 52: Whose Side You Believe

Severus Snape stalked down the second-floor corridor of Malfoy Manor, channeling his fury.

*I am the true culprit here. I should have realized that when the object of the boy's obsession became so temptingly available, he would take advantage of his momentary status among the Death Eaters to fulfill it. I should have been here to take charge of her myself. But I was not.*

*As a result, an innocent girl, one of the students I gave my word to safeguard, is at this very moment losing what she can never regain.*

*Still, I may be able to shame him out of repeat offenses. It is worth a try.*

He stopped outside the door he knew was Draco's and knocked firmly.

There was no response.

Holding his temper firmly in check, he knocked again, a bit harder.

Once more, nothing changed.

Severus clenched his fists, listening to the soft buzzing of the blood racing through his ears—

*Wait. That is not an effect of my anger, but of a spell.*

*A spell I know very well indeed.*

*But I had thought that the book in which I recorded my knowledge was in the hands of Harry Potter. How, then, has Draco Malfoy come to learn one of my spells?*

He shook his head, dismissing the question. *I can find out later. At the moment, what matters is that I invented the spell. I therefore know how to remove it.*

*And once it is gone, I shall be able to hear what is happening in that room, and stop it if it needs to be stopped.*

*As if there were any question about that.*

Severus lifted his wand and aimed it at the door. Finite Muffliato, he thought clearly, then raised his voice. “Malfoy, I wish to speak to you.”

“I’m busy right now, sir,” drawled the boy’s voice from within. “Come back later.” His usual crisp diction was obscured as if by sleep.

*Or by something else.*

Severus felt his jaw muscles tighten. “You will open this door, boy,” he said through his teeth, “or it will cease to exist. I give you thirty seconds to make yourself halfway presentable. Starting now.”

“Yes, sir.” The rolled eyes were audible, as was the emphasis on the honorific, thick enough to choke an Abraxan. “Coming right up, *sir*.”

Twenty-nine seconds of rustling cloth and squeaking bedsprings later, Draco Malfoy opened his bedroom door. He wore a green plush dressing gown and a lazy smile. His cheeks were flushed as with exertion, and his hair was ruffled.

*Neither of which he ever allows to happen in the usual way of things.*

Severus glanced past the boy and snarled under his breath. Luna Lovegood lay facedown on the ruins of a neatly made twin bed, her robes and hair in wild disarray, her shoulders shaking and tiny whimpering sounds coming from her.

*So this is the boy for whom you died, Dumbledore. No better than his father, and tempted by the same sorts of crimes, it seems...*

“What is going on in here?” Severus demanded.

“In four words, sir,” Draco said coldly, “none of your business.”

“Both you and Miss Lovegood are my students, which makes it my business. Do you realize how serious a crime it is to become... familiar with a witch against her will? Particularly an underage witch?”

“I don’t think she’ll be back to school any time soon, sir.” Draco smirked. “And she’s not underage.”

“Do not toy with me, Malfoy. Miss Lovegood is a sixth year, significantly junior to yourself.”

“Her birthday was last week, sir.” Draco turned to regard the girl on the bed with a possessive eye. “She told me so herself. Which means she’s of age, and I have been since June. We’re neither of us married yet, we’re both pureblooded—I would have thought you’d be happy to see me doing my part. Starting my family a bit early, to help with the repopulation effort.”

Severus counted to ten in Gobbledegook, reminding himself that the insolent brat before him was

important to both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. Killing him would disappoint one and anger the other.

*And though I care more about Dumbledore's disappointment, the Dark Lord's anger is frequently fatal.*

“Do you truly think Miss Lovegood's father will appreciate a Death Eater son-in-law?” he asked when he could speak again without shouting.

“He's not going to get a choice in the matter, now is he? And we won't be visiting much in any case. I don't care for a crackpot publisher as a father-in-law.” Draco ran his tongue around his lips as he watched Luna shivering on the bed. “Fortunately, for such a beautiful blossom, I can overlook a few nuts on the family tree. Besides, she might well be an orphan soon anyway, if he keeps up this nonsense about Potter. And then I can have her all to myself.” The lazy smile had changed into a hungry one. “As often as I want.”

*There is nothing more I can do here. Not without openly dueling him over the girl. I have no doubt that I could beat him, but it would attract attention, and that I cannot afford.*

*I killed Albus Dumbledore with my own wand and survived it. I can survive walking away from Luna Lovegood, knowing what has been done to her and what will be done again.*

*But first I will tell this idiot child the truth, since no one else seems inclined to do so.*

“You disgust me, boy,” Severus hissed at Draco, who pulled back, startled and affronted. “Was it for this I sheltered you and performed your task for you? So that you could assault the very students Albus Dumbledore would have given his life to protect? He believed that you could change, that there might be some shred of good left in you. I look forward to telling him how mistaken he was.”

Turning on his heel, he strode away, forcing himself not to turn back even as he heard a girl's frightened wail cut off by the sound of the closing door.

*She is a casualty of the war. Just as we all are.*

---

Draco stared at the door for a moment, trying to get his composure back, then whirled around as the high-pitched noise that so resembled a forlorn cry sounded again. “You,” he said, pointing a finger at Luna. “Not. Helping.”

Luna rolled over, revealing her face bright with merriment. “I couldn't stop it!” she managed to say between bouts of giggles. “He was so very angry at you, and you're not doing anything wrong at all!”

“Yes, but he can't know that.” Draco pulled off his dressing gown to reveal his rather wrinkled Hogwarts uniform and climbed onto the bed beside Luna. “No one can know it, at least no one

here. It seems strange, but it's safest for you if they all think I'm..."

"Enjoying me?" Luna suggested.

"Well, that I am doing. Just not quite the way they all think I am." Draco pulled Luna halfway onto his chest and began stroking her back, finding the places where a term filled with worry for her friends had knotted her muscles and massaging them loose again.

"I'm enjoying just having you here," he murmured against her ear. "Finding out there's someone in the world who believes me is worth a lot. Finding out it's you... I'm going to have to double-check my horoscope, to make sure I haven't used up all my life's luck today."

"Don't worry," Luna answered dreamily, stroking his hair. "If you run out of luck, I can give you more." Her lips fastened around his and made talking impossible for a few moments.

"That's nice," Draco said when he could speak again, "but what does it have to do with luck?"

Luna giggled. "Silly Draco. That's how you transfer luck from one person to another. I thought everyone knew that."

"Are you sure you don't need it for yourself, then?"

Luna regarded him for a long moment. "I get to mess up your hair and you don't hex me for it," she said finally. "I think I have enough luck to be going on with."

Draco remembered to reset the Muffliato just in time.

---

A familiar voice from across the hall brought Narcissa hurrying into the drawing room.

"Severus? What are you doing here? Is Draco all right?"

"Draco is unharmed, and has been home for nearly an hour," Severus said, looking up from his conversation with Lucius. "Have you not seen him?"

"No, I had not."

"As I thought. He was likely too busy to inform you he had arrived."

Narcissa frowned. There was a particular bitter edge to Severus' tone that she seldom heard.

"What is keeping him occupied?"

"The permanent houseguest you have acquired, about whom I was just informing Lucius."

"What houseguest is this? You know we can no longer keep prisoners here..."

"In the cellars," Lucius corrected, smiling broadly. "As Draco himself brought up, his bedroom is rather better protected than the cellars were—and with what Severus has been telling me he

witnessed a few moments ago, I doubt the Lovegood girl is in any condition to attempt an escape.” He smirked. “It seems Draco takes after me in more ways than his appearance. I must remember to congratulate him on his first conquest...”

Severus nodded curtly and hurried from the room. Narcissa shut her eyes, swallowing against painful thoughts.

*We must survive as a family if we are to survive at all, she reminded herself. And despite what they may do in other places and with other women, they are my husband and my son, and I care for them as they care for me.*

But deep within the heart of Narcissa Malfoy, the romantic girl who had once been Narcissa Black silently wept for the death of yet another dream.

---

“So, what shall we talk about until bedtime?” Draco asked, scraping his plate clean of the last remnants of apple tart. “Did you want me to go over everyone you’ll be meeting? There are a lot of them, even if it will probably just be the Beauvois and Mum to start with.”

“No, I think I’ll manage all right.” Luna dribbled melted ice cream around her bowl, creating abstract designs with the drops and splatters. “I was hoping to talk about Christmas presents.”

“Finally!” Draco raised his arms to the heavens in thanksgiving. “A girl who’s honestly mercenary and doesn’t pull out the ‘Oh you don’t have to get me anything’ line!”

“I meant presents we should get for other people,” Luna said, swirling her spoon through the patterns.

Draco deflated. “Oh.”

“They’re nothing you don’t already have. Didn’t you make a whole cauldronful of the potion I helped you figure out that you should use on Ron?”

“Yeah, I did—it’s easiest to brew in large quantities, and it stores pretty well forever as long as you haven’t added the bits of person yet...” Draco trailed off. “Hold the Floo. You helped me figure out? You weren’t there!”

Luna looked up at him through her eyelashes.

“Well, you were there,” Draco conceded. “But you were in the Forest. Asleep.” He was starting to get the feeling that being alone with Luna meant being outnumbered. “Weren’t you?”

“My body was,” Luna said, setting her bowl aside on the tray Draco had put together for them in the kitchens. “But I wasn’t using it right then. The other me was. And she was letting me use hers.”

“So,” Draco said slowly. “When we went off to the practice room to sing... we really went off to the practice room to sing. Didn't we?”

Luna nodded. “You do sing very well for never having lessons,” she said. “Maybe we could go Snorkack-hunting sometime, and you could hum to call them.”

“Maybe.” Draco was still trying to piece together what he'd just learned. “So that day I accidentally brought you along, the other Luna must have reached out and swapped with you... no wonder you don't want to go over who everyone is. You spent a whole day there already, you know them all.”

“I'll still need your help to keep them straight. But we need to keep talking about Polyjuice Potion. I think that would make a very good Christmas present for Hermione. Our Hermione, the one who's away with Harry right now. She's probably getting low, because she can't brew it in a tent. And I think Harry would like something shiny, to help keep his spirits up, and Ron should have something dangerous, because he was so brave to help Mr. Ollivander escape like that.” Luna beamed, obviously proud of herself for having thought of such good criteria for gift-giving.

“Er, Luna, I hate to point this out, but these are your friends. Not mine.” Draco set his plate on the tray as well, and levitated it to his desk absently, tucking his wand away again without thinking about what he was doing. “They don't like me—Weasley's got reason to hate me by now—and they're definitely not expecting a Christmas package from me.”

“That's why I'll address the parcels,” Luna said. “They'll know my writing, or at least know that it's someone they trust. And I'll need to write a letter to them as well, and one for them to give to Daddy—I won't mention you, or not in any way that would tell them who you are, but they should know I'm safe. So should Neville and Ginny, really. May I borrow your wand?”

Draco thought about it, then thought about it again, then a third time, and finally drew his wand and handed it over.

*Cue bloody screaming conription fits from half my teachers and all my relatives.*

Luna pulled a coin from her pocket and touched the wand's tip to it. “The famous DA Galleon, I presume?” Draco asked dryly, and got a giggle. “How long a message can you send at once?”

“Fifty letters or numbers, including spaces. It can be tricky to say all you want in that short a space, but we've got rather good at it. There.” Luna gave Draco the Galleon, and he spun it around between his fingers to read the message.

*With new friend and safe Happy Christmas from Luna*

“That does seem to say it all,” he agreed, passing the Galleon back. “But I had a couple other questions about these presents you want to give. The Polyjuice I do have, but ‘something shiny’ and ‘something dangerous’? That covers a lot of territory. Besides, Weasley's not even with them at the moment. And how are we going to get the presents to them without them spotting us and

attacking—well, attacking me? You they'd probably try and rescue from my evil clutches.”

“I don't know the answers to those questions.” Luna put the Galleon back in her pocket and returned Draco's wand. “But I know who does. And I know how to find them. Is it bedtime yet?”

“If you say it's bedtime, then it's bedtime,” Draco said, executing a sitting bow. “You're in charge here, you know.”

“I know.” Luna smiled at him. “I knew all along.”

“I thought you probably did,” Draco muttered. “All right, let's get the bed cleared off. Next stop, Fidelus Manor.”

## Be Careful

### 53: What Makes You Happy

“—absolutely brazen, not ashamed of himself in the least, leering at the girl and smirking through her pitiful cries until I wanted to wring his neck on the spot—”

“I believe you have been in this position before,” said the blonde woman sitting on the end of the Headmaster's desk. “Pacing about in this very office, listing off the points which irritated you about one of your students. Only then, it was another child about whom you were complaining.”

He paused in mid-turn, frowning. “When—ah, yes. I remember now.” His cloak flared out as he completed the turn and gave her a long and searching look. “Dumbledore brought that up as well, when I discussed this with him earlier. But he was present that day. You were not. How is it that you know my life better than I know it myself?”

“Because you think very little of yourself, while I think rather highly of you.” She slid to the floor and crossed to his side. “Severus, you cannot change what this boy does. You did your best to reason with him, and he would not listen. He was in his own home, he is of age, and he feels flush with success. While none of that excuses what he seems to have done—”

“There is no seeming about this, Cecilia,” Severus began, only to be cut off by delicate white fingers laid across his mouth.

*Very well, if you will not listen to me, I will not listen to you.*

*Instead I shall think about you.*

Cecilia, the woman of his dreams. Cecilia Black, for her looks had the fine-boned elegance of that family. Still, she was kind and thoughtful, loving and generous, instead of haughty and cruel as the present-day Blacks tended to be. Even Andromeda Tonks retained much of her pureblood hauteur, despite her marriage to a Muggleborn, and Sirius Black, Gryffindor and Auror or not, had been capable of deeds as vindictive as any Death Eater.

*Whereas the cruelest thing Lily ever did was well-deserved by its recipient.*

A few words broke into his ears. “—capable of putting up a front—” He nodded absently, returning to his thoughts.

*Even her name tells me from whom I have compounded her. The nickname “Cecy” is almost*

*indistinguishable from “Cissy”, as Bellatrix calls her sister, and I recall wondering for years why Lily signed her notes to me “L.C.”, until at last one day she told me her “old-fashioned” middle name, and was surprised that I thought it beautiful...*

“—but of course that would mean that the aliens could land there and turn everyone into gnomes, and we would have to relearn English, all but the curse words...”

Severus blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, you had best do exactly that.” Cecy had her hands on her hips. “I have been talking nonsense for the last two minutes, and until this moment, you did not notice. Which means you were not listening to a single word I said before that, either, were you?”

“I—” He sighed. “You do not know this young man, Cecilia. You cannot understand how impossible it is that he change his ways. He was born into a gilded cage, trained and groomed from childhood onward to be exactly what he is. That he was not able to kill, in my opinion, means only that he is weak, not that he is redeemable. In fact, I fear his soul may have been broken beyond true repairing, either that night or in the days that followed, when the Dark Lord tortured him for his failure.”

She tilted her head to one side. “The actions you've described do not sound like those of a broken man, or a child who wants only to be left alone by the terrible adults who've hurt him.”

“No, but they do sound like the same bluster with which he has always conducted himself.” He shook his head. “He has been able to rebuild himself to some degree, but as nothing around him has changed, neither has he. If it were not so important that I maintain my cover, I might have been able to intervene at the critical point, but it is too late now. He has patterned himself after his father once more, to the detail of desiring every woman who crosses his path and taking advantage of those who fall into his power. Like Miss Lovegood.”

“Poor child,” she said with soft intensity. “Both of them.”

They stood in silence for a moment. Severus broke it. “So, now that I have destroyed any vestige of Christmas spirit you might have possessed, what are your plans for the holiday?”

Cecilia laughed. “Never fear, my Christmas spirit is more resilient than that. Especially when I have been able to obtain three full weeks away from work.”

“How in the world did you do that?”

“A combination of seniority, family connections, favors called in, and a sympathetic superior.” Cecy looked out the window, where snow had begun to drift past. “I've told you before of our rotating timetable of parties, I believe, but that leaves me with a choice for the day itself. I would usually spend it with my cousin's family in his home in London, but this year I plan to celebrate with another family I know who have a country home.”

“Because of your young patient, I assume?” Severus closed the distance between them, laying an arm over Cecy's shoulder. “You had mentioned he would be staying with friends for the holiday.”

“More than a patient.” She leaned back against him, and Severus felt his skin tingle at her unthinking trust. “He is without family of his own who can care for him properly, and I have come to love him very deeply, as he does me. We have called one another by familial titles since the summer. For Christmas, I plan to make it official.”

“Saving those we can,” Severus murmured. “And trying with all our might not to blame ourselves for the ones we cannot.”

“Yes, we are not so different after all, are we?” Cecy looked up at him with a hint of a roguish smile. “What about you? Do you plan to spend your Christmas at Hogwarts, and shout ‘Bah! Humbug!’ at anyone who dares to give you good wishes?”

Severus laughed. “Compared to me, my dear, Ebenezer Scrooge was an amateur,” he said, feeling his spirits lift at last. “But yes, I will be remaining at the castle. Partly to ensure that the Carrows do not stay without me, but mostly because there is nowhere I would rather be. Especially not if you will come to see me here sometimes.”

“As often as I can,” she promised, lifting her face towards him as if she wanted to be kissed.

He obliged.

Outside, the snow continued to fall.

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Cecy awakened in her rooms at Fidelus Manor to a snowy morning and a conundrum.

*We have never met in the Headmaster's office before, Severus and I. It is always Hogwarts, the place where we find one another, but usually he comes to look for me in the rose garden, or I seek him out in his quarters in the dungeons. But last night, when I searched for him, I found him in Albus' office.*

*Which may not, in that place, be Albus' anymore, if the portrait on the wall with whom Severus was arguing when I arrived is any indication.*

*And Severus treated the place quite as his own, to the point of inviting me upstairs. I agreed, of course—along with the more usual reasons, I have always wanted to see how the Head's quarters were laid out—and the rooms had a distinct look of my love about them. Ingredients drying or curing on every flat surface not holding a book, for instance.*

She rose from her bed and wrapped her blue dressing gown around herself, sitting down by the fire to think.

*There are two possibilities. Either Draco's stories have such an influence over my mind that I*

*have begun to change my dreamworld to fit them, or...*

There was, of course, an easy way to find out if the other possibility were the true one. All she would have to do was open the door into Draco's bedroom.

*If he is alone, then my dreams are just that, concocted from my own fevered fancies and my son's tales.*

*If he is not alone—if a particular young lady shares his bed with him—*

She was not sure which alternative she would prefer.

*And thus, here I sit.*

The flames snapped and danced in the fireplace.

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Draco opened his eyes. Sunlight danced in patterns on the blue-painted wall above the door.

*Home again, home again. No Hermione coming in my window this time, but I wasn't expecting her. She'll be on the train most of the day, probably get here around suppertime with the others. Which means Luna and I will have the day to ourselves. With Mum.*

He let out a long sigh of contentment, pursing his lips through the last bit of it to ruffle Luna's hair. She stirred at the feeling, but settled back into sleep in the next moment.

*Wish Snape could see this. The “rapist” and his “victim” all curled up together, nice and chaste in their pajamas—well, me in my pajamas, Luna still in her robes, since she hasn't got anything else. We'll have to go shopping for her today.*

He groaned softly. *And if I know Mum, she'll claim it as “girl time” and take Luna out alone. Never mind that I like choosing robes, that I have a good eye for color and fit—no, it's a “girl thing” and I'm not allowed to take part. And they'll trade stupid Draco stories the entire time, and embarrass me at dinner in front of everyone.*

And he was actually looking forward to that, Draco realized. He wanted his mum to swoop in and carry off his girlfriend for the better part of the day, he wanted them to return with bags slung on their arms and smug smiles on their faces, he wanted them to giggle whenever they saw each other in the halls—

*Because it's normal. It's what normal families do when there's a new girlfriend around. And normal is the one thing I've never been allowed to be.*

*Well, no. That's not quite true. Normal was one of the two things.*

*The other was happy.*

Draco extricated his hand from the loops of rope he'd conjured the night before, to ensure he and Luna would continue touching all night, while he ruminated. *No one ever said it in so many words, but most of the people I knew as a child considered happiness vulgar. Something for the lower orders, not for us. We could take pleasure in study or a hobby, we could enjoy a good meal or a game of Quidditch, but happiness as a way of life? Surely you're not serious.*

Before he could stop himself, he'd imagined the answer of the tall, laughing, dark-haired man whom his mum so loved to tease, and who happily teased her in return.

*“Of course I'm Sirius—so stop calling me Shirley!”*

He chuckled aloud, making Luna stir again. Her hand, now free, groped about for a moment, until Draco tentatively laid his own hand across it. She intertwined her fingers with his, pulled his arm across her like a scarf, and cuddled closer to him, nestling her head under his chin and emitting a humming sigh.

*“Put that in your cauldron and brew it, Snape,”* Draco muttered. *“Stupid git.”*

He shook his head, carefully so as not to bump into Luna's. *Enough about him. I'd rather think about Christmas parties. All twelve of them.*

For, to his amazement, each family of his acquaintance hosted a party on a different day of Christmas, drawing straws near the beginning of November to determine who would host which day. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were quiet and private, for family only, but the following twelve days were wild and wonderful, and woe betide the first one to go home.

*We got the rundown a week or two ago. Let me see if I can do it all from memory.*

This year, the Potters got the Quaffle first, with a ball on St. Stephen's Day, followed the next day by the Wiltshire Blacks, Regulus and Morgan. They'd be at the Riddle house in Yorkshire on the Day of the Holy Innocents, and Harry's Muggle aunt and uncle would be hosting them the day after that, having rented a local meeting hall for the purpose, as their house in a quiet Surrey suburb was woefully inadequate.

*Another couple things for the list of “ways to make Potter's mouth fall open”.*

Aunt Andy's house in London was the site of the New Year's Eve party, and Lord Albus had, as always (this was the one slot which never changed), invited everyone to Hogwarts for New Year's Eve itself. Draco wasn't sure what to make of the rumors that the Headmaster's brother would be dropping a goat from the Astronomy Tower to mark the precise moment of midnight.

*Neenie insists it's true, but she's got that funny look on her face that means she knows something about it I don't...*

The French contingent—the eldest Weasley brother Bill and his part-veela wife Fleur, and Hagrid and Madame Maxime—were in charge of finding the venue for New Year's Day, as that would

necessarily be a quiet and reserved affair.

*Because everyone's still hung over from the night before.*

Danger's parents, whom Draco hazily recalled were named David and Rose, would allow their house to be invaded next. According to Ray, they spent most of their time at these parties watching their horde of relatives and friends with a happily bemused look, as though wondering how exactly two dental degrees and one bookish daughter had led to a house full of half-drunk wizards singing off key.

*'Course, if Granger and Weasley smooth things over, Granger's parents might end up wondering the same thing.*

The London Blacks, Sirius and Aletha, would take over from there, followed in quick succession by the Weasleys, the Lovegoods, and the Beauvois, who, like the Potters, often swapped their draw to get either first or last position.

*One of those things about having a "stately home". Means you have things other people may not. Like ballrooms. And where there's a ballroom, people generally expect a ball. So we start and end with tradition, but the days in between can be quite literally anything... Ray swears blind Dumbledore filled the Great Hall with sand one time, and they had a beach party to ring in the New Year... and Ron says Fred and George are in charge of the party at the Burrow this year, I'd better watch my back that day...*

A knock at the door brought Draco back to his surroundings. The parties, wild or sedate, were still several days in the future, and he had some explaining to do about the girl in his bed.

"Come in," he called. Luna shifted but did not wake.

Mum opened the door and stepped into the room. Her eyebrows went up at the sight of the bed's other occupant, and she folded her arms.

"Nothing happened," Draco protested.

The eyebrows lifted another inch or so. "Nothing?"

"Well. Almost nothing."

"Anything that you wouldn't have done in front of me?"

Draco flushed. His mum chuckled. "Never fear, little love, what's done is done. I will not scold you for it."

"Thanks. I'd get up to hug you, but I'm a little stuck at the moment..."

Mum laughed again and crossed the room to sit on his bed. To Draco's secret delight, she put her arms around both of them, though that could just have been because Luna hadn't left her much

room to do anything else.

“As long as the story I heard last night is not true, what you did is your business and hers, not mine,” she murmured into his ear. “I will, however, remind you that there are certain lines which should not be crossed until you have made a commitment.”

“Nothing happened like that, Mum.” Draco squeezed her arm between his shoulder and neck in lieu of any more comprehensive hug. “We snogged, we cuddled like this, I rubbed her back...”

“And her front?” Mum inquired blandly.

“Er.”

“In other words, you were a pair of teenagers discovering that you care about one another.” Mum smiled, dropping a kiss on Draco's cheek and another on the side of Luna's head. “Take it slowly, my love. But enjoy it. First love comes only once in a lifetime. Now, you two will likely be hungry, and then I would enjoy learning how you truly found one another.”

“I thought you already knew—” Draco stopped. “Wait, how could you know? My days here come after my days there; I can't use the TVP to see into my future, only my past.” He raised an eyebrow of his own at his mum. “So how, exactly, did someone tell you a story about Luna and me last night?”

“That is part of a story I need to tell you in my turn,” Mum said quietly. “But after breakfast. We will all need to be well-fed to understand this.”

“Oh, joy,” Draco muttered. “Just what my life needed. More impossible complications.”

“I believe it is part of the price you must pay for finding us.” Mum kissed his cheek once more. “I will see you downstairs. Both of you.”

“See you,” Draco said to her back as the door closed behind her.

*So the price of a life worth living is a little confusion, a few strange tasks, and tweaking my Headmaster's nose.*

*Somehow I think I'm getting a bargain.*

*I just hope the rest of the bill doesn't come due suddenly.*

## Be Careful

### 54: What You Remember

“Many years ago,” Mum said over breakfast, “near the time our Troubles were ending, I dreamed one night 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.”

Draco served himself another sausage, speared it with his fork, and bit the end off it. Luna was listening intently, stirring her eggs about on her plate.

“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, the death he considered—with some justice—to be his own fault. 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. And when I saw a picture of the young man, I agreed.”

“Why?” Draco asked, putting the sausage down on his plate. “Was he someone you recognized?”

“He was. And for that reason, I thought I had invented the dream myself.” Mum blew on her tea, smiling sadly. “You see, I had fallen in love with my world’s version of that young man. But he loved another and had no time for me. So I believed that my unrequited desires had coincided with my healing abilities and given me a dream version of that young man who would have reason to care for me, and in time to love me.”

Draco was starting to have a nasty suspicion. “And how long did you dream about him?”

Mum smiled. “I still dream about him, Draco. My latest dream was just last night, which makes it more than sixteen years. But until this past summer, I had no suspicion that they might be anything more than dreams. Now, I am fairly sure that they are.”

“Are you in love with Headmaster Snape, then?” Luna asked, as Draco was temporarily unable to speak.

“Yes, I believe I am.” Mum took a sip of her tea. “And if I am not greatly mistaken, he loves me in return, as much as a man may love one he believes unreal. He calls me his greatest comfort, and

says that I keep him sane in an insane world.”

“No wonder you did so well with me,” Draco muttered. “You’d had practice.”

“You, Draco, are entirely real to me, and were from the first moment I touched you,” Mum said with a trace of a snap in her tone. “I am still attempting to comprehend that Severus, my Severus, might be real in that same way. Do not feel your place threatened, for it is certainly not.”

“Sorry.” Draco stared into his plate. “It’s just—”

“That Severus Snape killed Albus Dumbledore in front of your eyes?” Mum suggested. “That you see in him a faithful servant of the same Dark Lord you are desperate to escape?”

“That’s part of it.”

“Then let me assure you that he is not.”

“No, I’d thought not,” said Luna, helping herself to a piece of toast as a fresh rack appeared and piling her mutilated eggs on top of it. “He was far too nice when he found us with the sword. I’d worried a bit that he might have used our blood to control his Slicker infestation, but instead he just sent us out to the Forest with Hagrid.”

Draco had a feeling he might regret asking, but anything had to be better than trying to assimilate the idea of Snape as not only good but his mum’s... *friend, Draco, stick with friend, anything else is going to drive you mad.* “Slicker infestation?” he said to Luna.

“Oh, Slickers are terrible. They look just like black rain jackets at first, but when you put them on, they cling to your head and never let go, and make it look as if you never wash your hair, no matter how often you really do. And the only way to get them free is to sprinkle them with blood from a male and a female virgin.” Luna took a bite of her eggs on toast. “I’d qualify,” she said indistinctly through it. “So would Neville, I’m pretty sure. I don’t know about Ginny, but I think so. Harry’s a nice boy.”

Draco pushed his plate away and put his head down on the table. “Add that to the list of things I didn’t need to know,” he mumbled. “The various experience levels of Gryffindors. And one Ravenclaw,” he added at Luna’s indignant noise.

“How do they compare to Slytherins?” Mum asked, a wicked smile audible in her tone.

Draco squeezed his eyes shut as a flood of the nastier things he’d been unable to avoid seeing in six and a half years in the dungeons deluged him. “Let’s just say only the younger half of the House would routinely qualify and leave it at that, shall we?”

“If you insist.” Mum was almost purring.

*She’s never going to let me forget this, is she?*

---

After breakfast was over and Luna and Draco had told their own story from the day before, Draco excused himself to bring the journal he was keeping about his new life up to date. Luna stayed, looking intently at the witch Draco called his mum.

*She would have been, if he'd been born in this world. But his dad's counterpart is someone very different. Someone important.* The whole house around her, in fact, seemed to resonate with “different” and “important”. She liked that.

But the question at hand was more important.

“What should I call you, please?” she asked.

“A good question.” The older witch pleated the edge of her napkin into folds. “Most of the children call me Aunt Cecy, though the only one I’m truly an aunt to is Dora—you’d know her as Tonks, I believe she’s just married your world’s Remus...”

Luna nodded, recalling Ginny’s excited revelations about the marriage and the coming baby. *I must remember to ask Lord and Lady Beauvoi—Moony and Danger, Draco says they like to be called—about those particular spells to send to her. She’ll like them.*

“So Aunt Cecy would be perfectly fine. But there is another possibility.” The witch returned Luna’s gaze, her own blue eyes just as intense as Luna’s blue-gray. “What do you intend towards my son?”

“I want to marry him,” Luna said without hesitation. “If it’s what he wants too, because I would never want him to be unhappy.”

“And you don’t think it’s too early to say that, that you’ve only just met, that you don’t truly know him yet.”

Luna shook her head. “Daddy knew right away when he met Mummy,” she said. “A lot of people thought he was too old for her, that he should have let my Uncle Gerald marry her instead—he wanted to, you know. And he did here. He’s the other Luna’s father.”

“He is. But that’s partly because Xenophilius died in the Troubles, saving Anita and Gerald if I’m not mistaken.”

“Just like Uncle Gerald got so badly hurt in the first war, and had to go away to America to recover among the Sand People of the Sonora Desert.” Luna smiled. She seldom found people who understood her so well. “A lot of things went one way in my world and another way in this one. It’s very interesting.”

“Yes, we think so too.” The witch chuckled. “And if Draco goes through with his plan with those journals of his, scholars will be considering it interesting long after all of us are dead. But back to our original topic of conversation. You definitely intend to marry my Draco, you said? I know you’re close with your father—will he understand if you vanish permanently into another world

that way?”

“Will I be able to visit him in dreams?”

“I... don’t see any reason why not,” the witch said slowly. “As long as he knows how to make, or where to buy, the potion that will put him into a receptive state. Or has some other way to achieve it. Yes, I think travel to a shared dreamworld will still be possible even after the physical way closes.”

“Then he won’t mind at all.” Luna nodded with certainty. “As long as he knows I’m happy, and we have a way to see each other sometimes.”

“I know people who could learn from your family,” the witch remarked. “But as I was saying. If you are sure you want to marry Draco, and you want him to know about it, there is something you could call me that would give him that impression quite unmistakably...”

Luna giggled. “I will,” she said. “But... I think not quite yet. It’s rather like hunting some of the shyer creatures—you have to be careful how much noise you make, because they’ll run away from you. So I’ll say Aunt Cecy for now.”

“Very well.” Aunt Cecy smiled. “And when you’re sure of how he feels, and you’re ready to drop a few hints to him... go ahead and switch to the other one.”

“I will.” Luna glanced down at the table, then back up shyly. “Mum.”

A moment later, she was being ruthlessly embraced.

*It’s no wonder Draco changed, she thought dizzily. Not with hugs like this.*

---

Dobby, when asked, produced a vast store of girls’ robes from the attics—Hermione, as befitted the eldest of a large family, had kept all her old ones to pass down the line, and the blue and silver which set off her brunette coloring also complimented Luna’s bloneness. The proposed shopping trip could therefore be postponed, though not abandoned.

*Heck, it’s probably grown, now that Luna’s seen what’s in fashion around here...*

Thus relieved from the necessity of going out, Draco and Luna spent the rest of the day wandering Fidelus Manor, poking their noses into every room with an open door, meeting the house-elves in unexpected places—Dobby, his daughter Echo, and Echo’s half-grown elflets Elrond and Virginia made up the Manor’s full complement—and trading stories about the various growing-up experiences of the son of a proper pureblood house and the daughter of a rather unusual wizarding family. As the afternoon drew on, they returned to Draco’s room, where he showed Luna the first few scrolls of his journal. She immediately sat down at his desk, opened one of the drawers, and pulled out a bright new set of drawing pencils.

“Where did those come from?” Draco demanded.

“I asked Echo if she could find me some earlier,” Luna said calmly, opening the first scroll and scanning down it. “May I see your wand, please?”

“Don’t mess that up,” Draco warned, tossing his wand over to her. “It’s the only copy.”

“I’m not going to mess it up.” Luna traced a small square on the right side of the parchment, then tapped the wand’s tip in its center. The words—Draco stood up to see—migrated to the left of the sheet, shrinking as they went, until it looked as though he’d deliberately left that space blank.

“What are you doing, then?” he asked as Luna set his wand aside. *Need to get her one of her own again—maybe tomorrow, if Ollivander’s is open so close to Christmas...*

“Improving it.” Luna pulled a brown pencil from the box, then looked up at him. “Go away for a little while. Take your wand if you need it, I’m done with it for right now. I want this first one to be a surprise.”

*You, my very dear, could give my mother bossy lessons. But if you insist.* “Yes, my lady.” Draco scooped up his wand and tucked it away, dropping a kiss on the back of a blonde head as he passed. “I’ll be downstairs if you need me.”

“Mmm,” said Luna absently.

So. Draco meandered down the hall, touching a carving here, a table there. *Mum and Snape. My Snape, for lack of a better term.*

With the knowledge that Snape was on the side of the Light, that he had in fact killed Dumbledore at Dumbledore’s express request, Draco could consider the man instead in terms of six years spent as his student and a member of his House.

*Of course, I don’t think now the same way I did then. But my memories are still useful... if often embarrassing as all hell.* He snorted. *In any case, I know Snape favors the Slytherins so much because he feels they get a raw deal from the other teachers. If things were a little fairer overall, the way they are here, he might not do it so much. And of course he picked on Potter for reasons which have already been established, and likely on Longbottom because he knew what Longbottom’d be capable of if he gave himself half a chance.*

“He doesn’t like teaching the lower levels,” Draco murmured to himself, running his hand along the balcony rail as he looked down into the main hall. “Stupid mistakes drive him mad. He’d do better here, only taking the advanced classes. And he never really liked being Head of House, either, with all the little squabbles he had to arbitrate. But there are a couple other Slytherin teachers here, so he wouldn’t even have to take over when Professor Riddle becomes Headmaster...”

*And why I’m talking as if he’s going to show up on the doorstep the way I did, I have no idea.*

“Draco!” Luna called from down the hall. “I’m ready!”

“Coming,” Draco called back, abandoning his thoughts of Snape gladly. *He’s for another day. This is Christmas, the first real Christmas of my life, and I’m not about to spend it thinking about a greasy-haired git without the sense to realize someone as great as Mum must be real!*

He swung around the doorframe into his room. “Here I am. What’ve you got?”

Luna pushed the scroll towards him. The square she had emptied of writing now held a neat drawing in colored pencil. A pale-blond young man with a pointed face, his black robes ruffled and stained, leaned shakily against a wall, his gray eyes hopeless.

“God,” Draco breathed, stretching out a hand without conscious effort to touch the picture, to make sure it was only pencil on parchment. For one instant, seeing it, he had been there again, felt again the heart-squeezing certainty that his life was over, that he would probably die before he was eighteen, that even if he survived he would be miserable forever, that he had no options left to him, no way out, nothing...

He shook off the moment and looked over at Luna. “You’re good,” he said.

“Daddy thinks so too,” Luna said, sliding her pencils back into their box. “But I haven’t had a chance to show many other people my drawing. So thank you.”

“Do you want to do some for the rest of them? I know there’s a lot of scrolls, but if you’re going to come back and forth with me, we get each day twice, and there’s not much to do back at Malfoy Manor...” Draco let his words fade away as Luna continued putting away her pencils. *You shouldn’t have asked, she did this one just as a favor, or because she couldn’t get it out of her head any other way, she’s not about to sit here and cramp up her fingers drawing all your stupid escapades...*

“I’d love to,” Luna said, closing the lid of the pencil box and putting it away in the drawer she’d taken it from. “But I think we should do it later. There are about to be people here.”

“About to be—”

The unmistakable sound of doors being flung open. “We’re home!” shouted four or five voices in chorus.

“People,” Luna said, turning and treating him to her sweet smile. “Will you introduce me?”

“I would be delighted.” Draco offered her his arm, and they left the room together.

Unseen on the scroll behind them, the Draco in Luna’s drawing seemed to acquire a gleam in his penciled eyes, as though, at this lowest moment of his life, he were allowing himself thoughts he’d never had before.

## Be Careful 55: What You Assume

“Harry, stop,” said the squeaky female voice.

“What’s wrong?” answered a wavering male.

“There’s someone there. Someone watching us. I can tell. There, over by the bushes.”

Draco and Luna flattened themselves against the ground, holding their breaths. If he looked up, Draco knew, he would see a balding man and a mousy woman standing in the middle of the Godric’s Hollow churchyard, peering their way—Potter and Granger under Polyjuice.

*They really have been using it up. Good thing they’re about to get a resupply. That is, as long as they go where we left it.*

He’d been in favor of leaving their Christmas package on the grave of the Potters, but Luna had vetoed it. “It’s not right,” she’d said firmly. “It’s not what graves are for. There are other places they’ll visit. We can leave it at one of them, and follow along to make sure they find it...”

“It’s a cat,” Potter’s voice broke into Draco’s memories, “or a bird. If it was a Death Eater we’d be dead by now.”

Luna turned her head to grin at Draco, who tapped his lips to remind her to keep quiet but returned the grin. *That’s ex-Death-Eater to you, Potter. Along with my sidekick, a member in good standing of Dumbledore’s Army. God, won’t your face be a treat when you find out what I’ve been up to this year...*

Potter and Granger slipped out through the kissing gate and vanished as they pulled on Potter’s Invisibility Cloak. Draco counted a slow ten before performing a Disillusionment on Luna as she did the same for him (his early Christmas present to her, given three days earlier, had been nine and three-quarter inches of willow with a unicorn tail hair core).

*Good thing her birthday really was last week. Starwing’s is in June. Ray’s Luna, in her practical way, had announced that as she was the younger of the two Lunas, she would hitherto be known by her nickname, leaving her elder counterpart to use their given name. It’d be a nuisance if she was still under the Trace. I’d have to do all the magic, and even doing a spell on her might set it off—it’s tricky that way...*

Luna caught his hand and led him towards the street, their fingers gripping tightly inside their spell-warmed gloves. “They’re going the right way,” she whispered. “We won’t have to lure them.”

“Good.” Draco hurried his pace to take the lead. Luna had her own Animagus amulet now—no one had been surprised to find her form, like Starwing’s, was that of the snowy owl—but it would have been a shame to use up one of her three transformations on nothing more than leading Potter and Granger to their Christmas box.

*Of course, with the way I used my first one, I’ve got no room to talk.*

A spell Meghan had taught Luna quieted their steps and gave them sure footing as they turned onto the icy pavement and ran up the street towards the destroyed cottage where James and Lily Potter had once lived. As they approached, a hand appeared from nowhere and closed around the rusty gate. Draco heard Luna draw a breath of excitement, and felt a matching surge himself. *Here we go.*

“You’re not going to go inside?” Granger’s voice objected. “It looks unsafe, it might—oh, Harry, look!”

The sign Draco and Luna had discovered on their own investigative tour of the village the day before rose from the ground. On it—Draco grinned to see that his idea had worked—rested a small white box, about eight inches on a side, tastefully ornamented with a sprig of holly and a Dirigible Plum.

*They’ll need all the help they can get, accepting this little lot.*

“What is it?” Granger whispered after a silent moment.

“It’s a box.”

“I can see that, Harry! I mean—”

“Who sent it, what’s it doing here, that sort of thing. I know.” Potter’s hand released the gate and was joined in visibility by its partner. Together, they lifted the box from the sign, which sank back into the ground. Box and hands vanished with a brief flurry of silver cloth. “Give us some light, Hermione?”

“*Lumos*,” Granger murmured. Draco imagined the scene, the two Muggles who were actually Potter and Granger stooped together under the Cloak, its shimmering interior now lit by Granger’s wandlight, Potter leaning over the box, on which Luna had written—

“To Harry and Hermione,” Potter read aloud, “and Ron if you’re...” He trailed off, and Draco recalled how sore a point Weasley’s name seemed to be with the pair since he’d left.

*I guess they don’t want to think about him too much. But now they’ve said it...*

“The Deluminator,” Luna breathed into his ear. “It’ll work now. Lord Albus said so.”

“That’s right.” Draco backed away a short distance, pulling Luna with him, to be sure their voices wouldn’t be heard. Dumbledore had been able to clear up the mystery of the item his now-deceased counterpart had left to Weasley; it would light his way back to the people he’d first used it around, as soon as they spoke his name aloud to activate it.

*Which they’ve just done. One reunited Golden Trio, coming up.*

“If you’re what?” Granger asked when Potter didn’t finish the sentence. “Harry, what’s wrong?”

“How did they know?” Potter said absently, as though he were thinking hard about something. “How did they know Ron wasn’t with us anymore?”

“No one’s supposed to know he’s with us at all, Harry, they think he’s ill at home! This was probably sent by someone who suspects that’s a trick but doesn’t know for sure—let me see it, I might know the writing—”

Luna pressed her face into Draco’s shoulder, and he heard the little sounds Snape had mistaken for whimpers, which he knew now were her giggles trying to escape. *That’s my girl, keep it quiet. He slid an arm around her and held her close. As soon as we’re sure they’ll take it with them, we can go home and go to bed, and wake up to Christmas Eve morning and those nut-topped sweet rolls I saw Dobby working on yesterday...*

“Someone’s coming,” Potter said. “Put it away for now, we can look at it later.”

*Success! Draco pumped his fist in jubilation. Happy Christmas, Potter, hope you like your gift—gifts, I should say, you’ll probably consider it a good thing to have Weasley back, though why I can’t imagine...*

“Yes, you can,” Luna murmured, lifting her head just enough to let the words escape. “You like Ron well enough, when he’s not being rude.”

“Just like a girl, bring sense into a good rant,” Draco muttered back. “And how’d you know what I was thinking anyway?”

“You were thinking aloud. It’s a bad habit of yours.” Luna leaned up and kissed his ear. “Are we going home now?”

“In just a second. I want to see who this is.” Draco maneuvered them both backwards between the Potters’ cottage and the one next to it, wondering idly what the Muggles had been told about the events of that fateful Halloween. A gas leak, perhaps, that seemed to be a favorite explanation of the Ministry’s...

A stooped figure, wrapped in layers of cloth, shuffled into view and stopped, staring at the place where Potter and Granger apparently weren’t. Draco squinted at it. The coverings made it hard to tell, but he thought this might be a witch, and quite an old one at that—she wasn’t likely to be a

Muggle, as she'd come straight to the Potters' house, which Muggles couldn't see—

Beside him, Luna went rigid, then released his arm and dashed away from the street.

Draco stopped himself cursing with a strong effort of will and spun in place, pulling his wand and canceling the Disillusionment just in time to see Luna's heels vanishing around the back of the next cottage over. Blessing Meghan for the Padfoot Spell they were both still under, he followed at a run, catching up with Luna several gardens away. She was on her knees, being wretchedly sick into the soft snow covering someone's aspidistras.

"What's wrong?" he asked urgently, removing his own Disillusionment as he dropped down beside her. "What is it?"

"Her," Luna panted between coughs. "That—witch—" Another heave interrupted her, and Draco caught her shoulders and held her upright as she gave up the last remains of her dinner.

"What about her?" he asked, releasing one of her shoulders to offer her a handful of clean snow. "I know she looked old, but did she smell that bad?"

"It wasn't that." Luna shoved the snow into her mouth, chewed it a moment, and spat it back out. "It was—" She gagged, but held it back this time. "Magic, Draco, it was Dark magic, very Dark—she's dead, she's only moving because there's something inside her—"

Draco felt his own stomach attempt to revolt. "Something inside her?" he repeated. "Like what?"

"A snake," Luna whispered. "A great huge snake with fangs. And it looked familiar, the magic—it looked like—" She glanced around, then back at him, and her eyes went even wider than usual. "That," she breathed, pointing. "It looked like that."

Draco followed her finger and swallowed hard.

Luna was pointing at his left forearm.

*A great huge snake with the Dark Lord's magic on it—walking around looking like an old witch—possibly even someone Potter would want to talk to—*

"Bagshot," he hissed, just as Luna cried, "Bathilda!"

They were on their feet, sprinting back towards the Potters' ruined home, Luna leaning into him for support, not bothering to hide themselves again, staying secret wouldn't help either of them much if Nagini managed to kill Potter, or stall him long enough for the Dark Lord to arrive and do it—

Draco swore as they reached the street. Potter, Granger, and the snake in Bathilda Bagshot's body were gone.

"There!" Luna cried. Draco swung around. Several cottages away, a door was closing.

*They've only just gone in—we might still be in time—*

He took off running and got three houses away before realizing Luna wasn't with him. She stood in the center of the street, whispering into her wand. Before he could start back, she pointed it into the air and spoke two words. A silver streak of light shot from it and vanished into the distance, and she turned and ran towards him.

“What were you doing?” he asked as she came abreast him.

“Sending for help.” Luna's eyes seemed to take up half her face, but her voice was strong. “Draco, we can't go in there, not either of us. The snake is a Horcrux, she'll be connected to *him* the way Harry is, she'll be able to tell *him* we're there. We can't go inside unless the snake's gone and so is Harry.” She glanced at him again. “And even then, I don't think you should.”

Draco nodded as they stopped at the gate of the house they'd seen entered. “I'm probably head of Hermione's hex-on-sight list still.” Charming the hinges silent, he noticed an unusual look on Luna's face. “What?”

“Nothing. Let's get closer. Hide me again?”

Two quick Disillusionments, and the gate opened and closed again silently. Up the path they stole, wands out and ready, Luna's free hand on Draco's arm, whether for comfort or to keep them together he didn't know.

“Why?” Hermione's voice rang out clearly from within the house, where the light of candles was now visible.

“Maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, and only to me?” Harry answered.

“Do you really think she knows who you are?”

Draco frowned. Something Luna had said earlier was niggling at his mind.

*The snake is a Horcrux... connected to the Dark Lord the same way Harry is...*

“Yes,” Harry's voice interrupted his train of thought. “I think she does.”

Draco shoved the thought into the back of his mind for later examination as Hermione said, “Well, okay then, but be quick, Harry.”

“Lead the way,” Harry said, probably to the person he thought was Bathilda Bagshot, and footsteps sounded within.

“You said you were sending for help,” Draco whispered to Luna as they edged off the path together, angling for a look in the windows of the room where the voices had been. “What kind of help?”

A thunderous crack sounded as a very tall person Apparated into the front garden and charged into the house, leaving the door open behind him.

“That kind of help,” said Luna as Hermione gasped.

“Where’s Harry?” Ron demanded.

“Upstairs—how did you—”

“Patronus.” From the sound of it, Ron was running for the stairs, Hermione just behind him. “Said danger—thought it was yours—”

“Not mine, I haven’t sent one, I don’t even know if I can—”

Over the end of this sentence, a door crashed open, and Hermione screamed as Ron bellowed, “*Diffindo!*”

“Come on,” Luna breathed, and ran for the house, Draco a step behind her. Harry was coughing upstairs, trying to say something through his struggle for air.

“Just breathe a second, mate, you’ll be all right,” Ron said, his voice shaking.

“No,” Harry managed to force out. “He’s coming—he knows—”

Ron swore. “Let’s get out of here—come on, Hermione, I can Apparate you both—”

“But the snake!” Hermione protested. “We should destroy it—”

“Its head’s over there and its body’s over here, I think it’s destroyed enough,” said Ron impatiently. “And it won’t matter if we’re caught. Come here, I promise I won’t splinch us.”

Light footsteps ran across the floor, a crack split the night even louder than the first, and silence fell.

Draco gripped the bottom of the banister tightly. *We have to get out of here*, clamored a familiar voice in his mind. *You heard Harry—he’s coming, the Dark Lord’s on his way, you can’t let him find you—you can’t let him see Luna—*

*The snake’s up there*, whispered a newer voice, one he’d only begun to hear in the last few months. *Ron killed it, but that’s not enough and you know it—it has to be destroyed like any other Horcrux, if it’s just dead the Dark Lord can make an Inferius out of it, that’ll be even harder to get rid of than the living snake and he’ll guard it like his most precious possession—*

“Follow me,” Draco said shortly, and ran up the stairs, feeling Luna at his heels. *She’s counting on you, Malfoy, don’t muff this up—you won’t have long—*

“Stay back a bit,” he warned as they entered the dark, foul-smelling bedroom. “I haven’t done this

before.”

“Right.” Luna’s near-silent footsteps backed away, and her invisible wand cast a beam of light over the room. Draco grimaced at the sight of Bathilda’s body, cast aside like another piece of the dirty laundry that littered the place, but there was no time, he had to deal with the snake—

*“Ignis diabolus,”* he said, pointing his wand at the limp serpentine body that lay under the window. Roaring flames shot from the wand’s tip, flames that crumbled the snake into soot at their first touch, and Draco played his wand up its entire length, counting in the back of his mind—ten seconds—fifteen—

*“Cessum diabolum!”* he snapped, jerking his wand roughly sideways, and the flames cut off. The clothing behind the snake was still afire, but the flames were a normal size now, and he and Luna would be safely gone before the house caught. The Dark Lord would arrive at an inferno with no sign of either his snake or the one who had destroyed it.

*Serves him right.*

“Did you see where the head went?” he asked Luna, turning.

“Here.” She had removed her Disillusionment, and did the same for him as she pointed to the foot of the bed. “Just here—hurry, Draco, please—”

Draco started towards the place Luna was indicating. His foot caught in one of the pieces of discarded clothing, and he fell headlong, catching himself on his forearms, nearly dropping his wand—he could see the head now, it lay alongside his left hand, he’d burn it just as soon as he could get his breath back—

The serpent’s hood flared open, and it struck, latching onto his arm.

Luna’s scream was distant in his ears as ice-cold purpose flooded him—or was that Nagini’s venom, seeking her last revenge? Draco didn’t know, and didn’t care. His world had narrowed to one purpose and one only.

*Destroy the snake. Kill the thing that’s killing me.*

He brought his wand to bear.

*“Ignis diabolus!”*

The blast of flame incinerated not just the snake’s head, but the flesh onto which it was fastened. Draco’s arm suddenly ended at the elbow, and the burning pain seemed to snap the trance into which he’d fallen. He sucked in air, and nearly choked on the thickening smoke in the room.

“Draco!” Luna fell to her knees beside him. “Draco—we have to go—you need help—”

“Fire,” Draco coughed, cradling his truncated arm to his chest. “Stop it—you have to—”

Luna turned her wand on the Fiendfyre which was beginning to rage up the bottom of Bathilda's bed. "*Cessum diabolum!*" she cried, then spun back to Draco. "Now we have to go. Where should I hold on?"

"Shoulder." Everything was starting to spin, and was that the sound of a door being blasted open below? "Tie yourself on—"

Luna's wand spun, cocooning her hand and Draco's right shoulder together. "Done," she said, throwing her cloak over both their heads. "Hurry—"

Draco aimed his wand at her. "*Dormio* ." She crumpled in place, and he let her weight carry him down to the floor.

*Can't hold on—going to pass out—not the same as sleep—he'll catch us—*

He tilted his wand back up towards himself as footsteps pounded on the stairs.

"*Alucino* ," he said, or thought he said.

The world slid away into shrieking darkness.

---

Draco awakened all at once. His throat was tight and sore, as though he'd breathed smoke—

*Maybe because I did.*

His left arm, or what remained of it, throbbed in time with his heartbeat, driving a whimper from him. His right seemed intact, but was pinioned to his side by some swathing material. Heavy weights lay over his legs, holding him still.

*Did I finish the spell? Did we make it out?*

The room around him was completely dark, the surface on which he lay too narrow and too hard to be his bed. His heart began to pound faster, the pain in his arm increasing to match.

*We didn't. We were caught. The Dark Lord caught us himself, destroying one of his Horcruxes, helping his enemies—*

As if in response to the thought, a woman screamed somewhere close by, a full-throated cry of anguish.

*He's got Luna, he's torturing her already—he'll start with me as soon as he's finished with her, or maybe do some together to see us hurt for each other—*

A second scream, and Draco squeezed his eyes shut as he realized the screamer wasn't Luna, couldn't be Luna, he'd have known her voice from a million—

*Which leaves only one person it can be.*

*Mother.*

*I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I never meant this to happen—I never meant any of this to happen—I honestly thought I could do it, could do some good—*

A tear escaped from the corner of his left eye and rolled down his face. One from his right eye joined it a second later.

*At least I tried. That's got to be worth something.*

He lay in darkness, listening to his mother's shrieks of pain, and waited for his turn to die.

## Be Careful 56: How You Explain

With an ear-shattering crack, three people exploded out of thin air in a wood in the west of England, the smallest nearly falling to her knees before the tallest caught hold of her. “Everything still attached?” he asked.

“I think so.” She patted at her head and sides shakily. “Yes. You?”

“Far’s I can tell. Harry too.” Ron hefted his unconscious friend, currently wearing the form of a small, balding Muggle man. “Did you have the tent set up anywhere?”

“No, it’s in my bag—hold on—” Hermione, clumsy in her unfamiliar body, fumbled her beaded bag from the pocket of her coat and held it in her left hand, drawing her wand with her right. “*Accio tent*,” she said, and a jumble of canvas and ropes soared out of the bag and landed on the ground in front of them. “*Erecto*.” The tent snapped upright and fixed its own pegs into the ground, stiffening into the same grubby-looking construction Ron knew so well.

*Emphasis on “knew”. Are they going to let me come back? Do they still want me?*

Harry moaned, twisting in Ron’s grip. “Take him inside,” Hermione said, pointing her wand upwards. “See if he’s hurt, there’s dittany in my bag if he is. I’ll do the protective spells and be right in.”

“Got it.” Ron lifted Harry from the ground—not a hard task with his friend’s normal body, even easier with this borrowed one—and ducked inside the tent with him, depositing him on the nearest bunk.

*It’s mine, or it was, but I don’t think that matters right now.*

Harry continued to moan as Ron pulled his jacket and sweater off him. The T-shirt he wore under them exposed a nasty puncture wound on his arm. Ron cursed and pulled Hermione’s bag in through the tent flap, then Summoned her little bottle of dittany and dribbled it into the two marks.

*The snake must’ve bit him. Not a killing venom, though, or he’d already be dead. You-Know-Who wants to do that himself, so it was probably just meant to keep Harry there, to slow him down so he couldn’t get away.*

Thoughts of You-Know-Who brought up thoughts of the bit of him which had driven Ron away from his friends in the first place, enshrined in the locket Horcrux they'd taken it in turns to wear.

*I hope it wasn't his go...*

Ron pulled Harry's shirt up and sucked a breath between his teeth. The locket was indeed hanging around Harry's neck, and had adhered to his skin where Nagini had coiled around him. Tentatively, Ron pulled at it, achieving nothing but a groan of pain from Harry.

*Blasted snake. Hope You-Know-Who likes her in two pieces.* Ron savored the thought of the fanged head soaring through the air, the result of his Cutting Charm—

*Of course, I hit Harry's wand too.* Guiltily, he glanced at the broken rod his friend still gripped in his right hand, its two halves connected by the thinnest possible strand of red feather. *If he doesn't hate me forever for walking out, he likely will for that—he loves that wand, and where's he going to get another one? I'll give him mine if he wants it, that's only fair...*

But at the moment, he needed that wand, and he was going to have to use another Cutting Charm. "Sorry, mate," he muttered, pulling his wand from his jeans pocket. "Can't leave it on you." He eyed the angle, tilting the wand's tip carefully back and forth, until he judged he was at the perfect slant to free the locket without hurting Harry any more than necessary.

*"Diffindo !"*

Harry jerked, then subsided. Ron quickly pulled the locket off his friend's neck and snatched up the dittany again, dripping it onto the oval-shaped area he'd basically skinned. A small cloud of smoke went up, and when it cleared, there was fresh pink skin where bleeding flesh had been.

*It'll do. Better than having this stuck to him, that's for sure.*

Ron glared at the Horcrux with hatred. "I'll get you yet," he said, hanging it on the end of the bed with more force than strictly necessary. "You wait and see, I'll find a way to kill you—you're not going to get away from me—"

"Who are you talking to?" asked Hermione, coming in.

Ron jumped, feeling his ears redden. "Er. No one."

Hermione only nodded, coming to kneel beside him. "How is he?" she asked, her stranger's face wrinkled in lines of worry.

"Not sure. The snake bit him, it's on his arm, here, look..."

Hermione shook her head, and kept on shaking it. "I never should have agreed to this," she said, her voice trembling. "I never should have said it was a good idea, I should have known it would be a trap, I should have known Volde—"

Ron had his hand over her mouth before she could get the last syllable out. “Sorry,” he said quickly as her eyes flashed bloody murder at him. “But it’s not just me this time, the name’s been Tabooed, Hermione, it’s how they caught us in Tottenham Court Road, Harry said it and they were able to track him down through that. As soon as you say it, a Trace goes active, it cuts through just about any security charm you can put up, and the Snatchers aren’t far behind...”

Hermione pushed his hand away. “Snatchers?”

“They go looking for Muggleborns and Order members, try and make some gold by turning them in at the Ministry. Some of them can barely hold a wand straight, but some are actual Death Eaters, and you never know what kind you’re going to get—”

“Dad!” shouted Harry suddenly, drawing their attention. “Dad, no, your wand, get it, no, no, *no!*” His whole body stiffened, and he made a sobbing sound, as if he’d just watched someone he loved die.

*He probably did.* Ron turned away, feeling as if he were intruding. *He’s probably watching that whole night again, seeing it through You-Know-Who’s eyes...*

“Harry,” Hermione whispered, reaching for him. “Harry—oh, Harry—”

Ron caught her hand before it could make contact. “Better not,” he said. “We don’t know who would wake up.”

Hermione glared at him, then whirled and got to her feet, stalking off to the other end of the tent. Ron glanced at Harry, flicked Cushioning Charms onto the nearest hard objects, and stood up to follow Hermione.

“Look,” he said awkwardly as he got close. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” Hermione spun around, fury in every line of her. “You’re sorry? After you walk out on us, leave us alone out here, stay away for sixty-eight days—*sixty-eight days*, Ron!”

“You counted?” Ron said before he thought.

Hermione’s face contorted. It took Ron a moment to realize it wasn’t just her anger. *Her Polyjuice must be wearing off. Wonderful, that means I can get beaten up by a Hermione who looks like herself.*

“We had no idea what had happened to you!” Hermione shouted over Harry’s moans. “We had no idea if you were alive or dead! You could have been captured by Death Eaters for all we knew—oh, why am I bothering?” She pushed past him, headed back towards Harry. “Just stay out of my way, Ron,” she said without turning to face him. “Either that, or get me some water and clean rags.”

Ron went into the kitchen and rummaged in one of the cabinets until he found the rags, then poured some water from the battered teakettle into a shallow bowl. Returning to Harry’s bedside,

he set cloths and bowl down beside Hermione, who dipped the one into the other and began to wipe Harry's forehead, once more marked with its distinctive scar.

"Why did you think the Patronus you saw was mine?" she asked after a moment.

"It looked like yours." Ron shut his eyes to remember. "Long and lean, like your otter. And it was a girl's voice, too. But I should've realized it wasn't yours. It was talking about you, not from you." He opened his eyes again. "If that makes any sense."

"It makes enough." Hermione's gaze was fixed on Harry, who was still tossing back and forth, now calling for his mum. "What did it say?"

"It said my name. Like the Deluminator did."

"The what?" Hermione turned to look at him. "What does the Deluminator have to do with anything?"

"Earlier this evening," Ron began. "I was sitting and thinking about you, you and Harry, when all of a sudden I heard a voice. It said my name, and a couple other words I don't remember. It was coming from my pocket." He dug out the Deluminator and held it up. "From this."

Hermione was watching him closely, as if trying to decide if he were lying or not.

"A couple seconds later it did it again. 'How did they know Ron wasn't with us anymore?' it said. It didn't sound quite like Harry, but I knew it was him, who else would be talking about me?" Ron ran a finger along the outside of the Deluminator, hoping Hermione believed what he was saying. "So I started packing a bag, getting my things together, and then the Patronus popped up."

"The Patronus you thought was mine."

"Right. It said, 'Ron, use the Deluminator now, they're in terrible danger!' It was a girl talking, someone we know, but it wasn't you and it wasn't Ginny..." Ron shook his head. "Never mind. I clicked it, and my lamp went out. But this ball of blue light appeared outside my window, like it was waiting for me. I went outside, and the light—it went inside me, right through me, right here..." He poked himself in the chest. "And I knew where to go, I knew where I'd find you. I Disapparated, showed up in that garden, ran inside the house, and the rest you already know."

Hermione nodded. They sat in silence for a few moments, broken only by Harry's sobbing breaths.

"I wanted to come back almost as soon as I'd left," Ron said. "But..." He stopped.

"But what, Ronald?"

*Ouch. Full name, just like Mum in a mood.* "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"Finish what you were saying. Please."

Ron hadn't been sure it was possible to sound that polite through clenched teeth. "All right." He gathered up his nerve to tell the part of the story he wasn't sure he believed himself. "You know how you said you didn't know if I'd been caught by Death Eaters?"

"Yes."

"Well... I was. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

*She's not calling me a liar. This is good.* "It was Malfoy. Draco Malfoy, he was here—not *here* here, but where I left you. I went around a tree, everything went black, and the next thing I knew I was somewhere else, tied up, and Malfoy had my wand."

"He was here?" Hermione repeated, her forehead wrinkling. "Sorry, I mean he was there? Right outside the tent? He must have heard me calling you—why didn't he take me too? Or wait around to see if he could catch Harry?"

"I don't know." Ron picked up another rag from the pile and dipped it into the water, holding it out to Hermione to replace the one in her hand. "Once I woke up, he taunted me a bit, but he wasn't like he usually is." He described their encounter as best he could recall, pointing out the moments when Malfoy had seemed concerned for his welfare or his feelings. "But none of that is the weirdest thing he did." He wrung out the rag Hermione'd given him back and hung it on the end of the bed to dry. "He had Polyjuice with him. And he Summoned hair off my robes to put in it." *Better just say it fast.* "He turned me into you."

Hermione blinked at him a few times. "Into me?"

"I got better," Ron added sheepishly.

"Of course you did, Ron, Polyjuice only lasts an hour at the normal dose." But Hermione was smiling a little. "So what did Malfoy do with... 'me'?"

"Took me home and showed me off," Ron said in disgust, and narrated the story of his trip through Malfoy Manor. While he was explaining what Malfoy had said in the cellars, a thought occurred to him. "Hermione, do you climb trees?"

Hermione gave him a sidelong look. "Sometimes," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because Malfoy said you did. Said he'd seen you at it. And I was wondering..."

"Not usually at Hogwarts," Hermione said, looking worriedly at Harry, who was thrashing about again. "The robes get in the way. But I don't know what Malfoy does with his summers. Maybe he goes Mudblood-spying. It doesn't matter, go on."

"All right. He cut my hands free, said 'Have a nice escape' in my ear, and shoved me through a door." Ron edited out the other thing Malfoy'd said, as it made no sense and had been directed

specifically at Harry in any case. “I was just getting it sorted out which way was up when this shaky voice said hello. Turns out it’s Malfoy Manor where they’ve been keeping Ollivander all this time—more than a year, it’s been. Or it was.”

“Was?” Hermione leaned forward as Harry’s movements began to subside. “Oh, Ron, did you really—”

“We talked for about twenty minutes,” Ron went on. “Took me ten or so to convince him I wasn’t actually you. I finally quoted my wand specifics at him, that sold him, or shut him up at least. He was telling me how often we could expect to get fed when we both heard a noise.” He grinned, feeling again the disbelieving hope of that moment. “A couple boards in one of the walls just—shifted. Moved aside like someone bespelled them. And beyond that, there was a tunnel. Not very big, reminded me of the one to the Shrieking Shack, but big enough we could get out through it. And we did.”

Hermione was nodding slowly, the rag in her hands twisting tighter and tighter as she listened. Harry lay quietly on the bed beside them.

“We finally popped out the other end—I’ve never been so glad to see the moon—and I went to look for my wand. Found it right where Malfoy’d said it would be, up an elm tree. I’d just climbed down when the Polyjuice wore off.” Ron chuckled slightly. “Ollivander was a bit surprised to see me coming back when you’d gone away. I don’t think he was really convinced I was who I said I was until then. I got him on his feet and Side-Along-Apparated him to Bill and Fleur’s house, Shell Cottage. Nice place, right on the seashore.”

“Why not the Burrow?”

Ron snorted. “You think I was about to tell Fred and George I walked out on you? Not to mention Mum? Ginny’d have something to say about it as well. But Bill’s always been decent to me, I knew he’d listen, and he did. He listened maybe a little too well.” He grimaced. “Convinced me to stay for a cup of tea, and Fleur must have slipped a sleeping potion into it, because the next thing I knew, it was tomorrow morning, and you and Harry were already gone. I know. I went back and looked.”

“So is that where you’ve been, all this time?” Hermione asked softly. “Shell Cottage?”

Ron nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t come back, Hermione, honestly I am,” he said all in a rush. “But you didn’t see Ollivander—Harry didn’t tell us the half of it, he was being starved, they’d obviously pulled him out to torture him any time they wanted a bit of fun, I had to help him, even if it meant I missed my chance to get back to you—”

Vaguely, he wondered how he’d landed on his back, and why Hermione was across his chest. Then her lips locked onto his, and he stopped wondering about anything except how to keep her doing what she was doing.

“—set the house on fire and disappeared,” said Harry loudly from the bed.

Hermione pulled away, gasping. “Harry?”

Ron sighed. *I should have known...*

Hermione looked back at him and smiled. “Later,” she mouthed, before getting to her knees. “Harry? Are you all right?”

*Later. Ron sat up, hugging the word to his chest like an anti-Horcrux. Later. She said later. She liked it—she wants more—*

Hermione blew out her cheeks in frustration. “He’s gone again.”

Ron scooted closer to the bed, looking down at his best friend. “D’you reckon there’s anything we can do?”

“I don’t think so—you said it earlier, we don’t know who we’d be waking up, Harry or You-Know-Who.” Hermione looked ill at the thought. “I think we have to wait and let him come out of it on his own.”

“Then...” Ron reminded himself he was a Gryffindor and swallowed his fear. “Can now be later?”

Hermione bristled. “Ronald Weasley, of all the self-centered, immature—”

“We can stop when he wakes up!”

Hermione fell over laughing. “And I wouldn’t want you any other way, would I?” she got out between her helpless chuckles. “All right. Yes.” She caught her breath and sat back up. “Now can be later. Come here.”

Ron scooted closer and gently pulled Hermione into his arms.

Beside them, Harry lay on the bunk, his eyes moving under their closed lids.

## **Be Careful**

### **57: Why You Strike**

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying in a bottom bunk in the tent, aching all over, his arm and his chest burning. From the small noises nearby, he wasn't alone.

He rolled onto his side, stared at what he was seeing, and fumbled for his glasses, finding them perched on the table above the bed and putting them on.

What he was seeing didn't change.

*I'm not sure whether to douse them with water or say, "Well, finally."*

He settled for a middle approach. "Have I come at a bad time?" he said, or tried to say. His voice was hoarse and raspy, as though he'd been screaming.

Ron and Hermione broke off their clinch instantly. "Harry!" Hermione gasped, flinging herself at him. "Harry, thank heaven, you're all right!"

"Good to see you back, Harry," said Ron from behind her, grinning.

"And you." Harry sorted through his memories, finding the last ones that were his own rather than Voldemort's. "You killed the snake."

"Sure did." Ron grimaced. "Got something else too, though."

"What?"

Hermione let go and timidly picked up an object sitting on the floor beside the bed.

Harry's stomach plummeted as he stared at what was left of his wand.

"I'm really sorry, mate," Ron said. "I was a bit panicked, I didn't aim as well as I should've—you can use mine whenever you need to—"

"Ron." Harry coughed painfully after the word, and Hermione Summoned a glass of water from the kitchen. He drank, then looked up at his friend; he knew he should be angry, but somehow Ron's mere presence, along with the knowledge of Nagini's death, insulated him. "Stop apologizing for saving my life."

“I’m not. I’m apologizing for ruining your wand.”

“That was an accident. Like it was when your wand got snapped, back in second year.” Harry found a small smile somewhere. “Maybe we can get Vol—”

“No!” Hermione and Ron shouted in chorus. Harry stopped, blinking at them.

“I know, Harry, I still think it’s silly, but there’s a real reason for it now,” Hermione said rapidly, and explained about the Taboo, with Ron chiming in when he thought she hadn’t said something quite the right way.

“All right,” Harry said when they were finished. “Maybe we can get *You-Know-Who* to try something with my wand and blow it up on himself.” He smiled a bit more. “Which of you thought to set the house on fire before we left? Or was that an accident too?”

Ron and Hermione traded looks. “Harry, the house wasn’t on fire when we left,” Hermione said. “It was perfectly sound, there was just a dead snake in one of the bedrooms.”

“Are you sure?” Harry closed his eyes, thinking. “A spell didn’t ricochet and spark something off?”

“I was the only one throwing spells,” said Ron. “And it didn’t ricochet, it just did what I meant it to do—and a bit I didn’t. But no fire. Why?”

“Because the house was definitely on fire when he got there.” Harry swallowed against the taste the dreams had left behind in his mouth. “I was him. I saw it. Heard it. Heard a girl shout a spell from inside just before I blew the door open, heard a boy say two spells on my way up the stairs, and saw a boy and a girl disappearing from the floor just as I got to the bedroom...”

“Harry,” said Hermione in a worried tone. Harry opened his eyes to see her peering closely at him. “None of that was us. We were gone before he ever got there.”

“I know.” Harry nodded slowly. “But I know what I saw too. There were definitely two people in that house who vanished just as Vol—” He bit his tongue as Ron made frantic gestures at him. “As *You-Know-Who* got there.”

“You said they disappeared from the floor?” Hermione said. “How do you mean?”

“They were lying flat on the floor.” Harry demonstrated with his hands. “Side by side. Their heads were covered with a cloak, he never saw who they were, he thought boy and girl from what he could see of their bodies and what he knows—he thinks it was you and me, Hermione, it’s why he was so angry, because he thought he missed us by a fraction of a second...”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Hermione objected. “You can’t Apparate lying down, you have to be moving. Unless they had a Portkey—but why would they lie down to use it?”

“I’m more interested in who they are,” said Ron. “Maybe the girl’s the one who sent me that

Patronus.”

Harry frowned. “What Patronus?”

Retelling Ron’s story, including “Tell Potter his sister’s a Slytherin,” took nearly half an hour, during which time Hermione made tea and pulled the last of the bread and cheese out of the cupboards. Between bites and sips, Harry and Hermione took turns recounting their own story, until they got to the night just past. Ron sat up straight when Harry mentioned the mysterious box addressed to all three of them. “What’d you do with it?” he asked.

“Put it in my bag,” Hermione said, Summoning it over her shoulder. Harry tried to suppress a stab of jealousy and was partially successful. “Here, let me get it out—”

A moment later, the white box reposed in Hermione’s lap. Ron peered at it. “Does it say who sent it?”

“No, but I’m sure I’ve seen this handwriting before!” Hermione drummed her fingers on the top of the box in frustration. “It’s someone I know from school, from Hogwarts, I just know it!”

“Maybe there’s a name inside,” Harry suggested. “Why don’t we open it?”

Hermione found the catch and flipped open the top.

Inside the box were three smaller boxes, one labeled with each of their names. Crumpled paper filled the rest of the space, and an envelope reposed on top.

“Ooh, gimme,” said Ron, reaching for his box.

Hermione slapped his hand away. “You always open the card first, Ron! Honestly, where were you raised?”

“In a burrow,” Ron said, grinning. “Harry, care to do the honors?”

Harry accepted the envelope from Hermione, noting in passing that it was addressed as the box had been: *To Harry and Hermione, and Ron if you’re there*. Slitting it open, he pulled out a sheet of parchment wrapped around another envelope.

“Who’s that one to?” Ron asked.

Harry unfolded the parchment to look. “Addressed to ‘Daddy,’” he said. “Guess we’ll find out who that is when we read the letter.”

Hermione flipped the lid of the big box shut again and pulled the holly, with its oddly-shaped orange ornament, free. “I’ve seen this before,” she said slowly. “Or something like it—Ron!”

“What?”

“Did you say you thought you recognized the girl’s voice? The one who sent the Patronus?”

“I’m sure I did, why?”

“Because I think I know now who addressed this box.” Hermione was starting to smile. “Harry, look at the signature on the letter. See who wrote it.”

Harry skimmed down past several paragraphs of writing to the large, swirling name inscribed above a lifelike colored pencil drawing. “Got it.”

“Everyone say it on the count of three,” Hermione ordered. “One, two, three—”

“Luna,” they said in semi-unison.

“But what’s Luna doing leaving us Christmas presents?” Ron asked. “And how’d she know where you were going to be?”

“Maybe she says,” said Harry, rattling the letter. “Shall I read it?”

“Yes, please do.” Hermione settled in to listen.

“Dear Harry and Hermione, and Ron if you’re there,” Harry read aloud. “I should start by telling you that I’m perfectly all right, even though the Death Eaters took me off the Hogwarts Express on my way home for Christmas—”

“What?” shouted Ron and Hermione together.

“They kidnapped her?” Ron blurted.

“Why would they do that?” Hermione wanted to know.

“—because of what Daddy’s been writing in *The Quibbler* about you, Harry,” that young man finished. “He’ll be worried about me, so if it’s not too much trouble, could you please take him the letter I’ve enclosed here? It will tell him that I’m all right, and that he should go into hiding. I’m hoping Ron’s family will help him with that, since we’re nearly neighbors.’”

“That’s true,” said Ron. “I’ve never been there, but they do live close by us.”

“I truly am all right here where I am,” Harry went on. “I’ve found an unexpected friend who is keeping me safe. The Death Eaters destroyed his family and ruined his life, so he hates them as much as we do. He’s been working to find things that will help bring them down, and some of them are enclosed here. I hope you can find a good use for them.’ Find things?” he interrupted himself. “You don’t think she means...”

“Probably too much to hope for, Harry,” said Hermione with a sigh. “This is Luna, after all. But go on, keep reading.”

“Hermione’s present is something I hope you can use sometime soon,” Harry continued. “Neville and Ginny and I and some of the others have been keeping up the DA, but it would really help us a lot if we could borrow your Map, Harry. I know it was your dad’s and your godfather’s, but we would be very careful with it and return it when everything is over. If you would consider lending it to us, that would be a great help. The Hogsmeade days this term are the seventeenth of January, the fourteenth of February, and the twenty-first of March.”

“And that tells us nothing about what my present might actually *be*,” said Hermione with a sigh.

“So why don’t you open it?” Ron suggested.

“No, Harry should finish the letter first.” Hermione looked up. “Unless you think I should...”

“Go on,” Harry said, setting the letter aside. “I’m curious myself now.”

Hermione lifted her box out of the larger one and opened its top. A large beaker, such as they used in Potions class, met Harry’s eyes.

“Oh my!” Hermione lifted the beaker out, displaying its contents—it was nearly three-quarters full of a familiar muddy substance. “I’ll have to test it, to be sure it won’t strand us in another form or turn us inside out, but if it’s good...”

“Then we can turn into just about anyone we please,” said Ron, leaning back on his hands. “Even Mad-Eye didn’t have that much on hand. Go on, Harry, let’s see what Luna says about mine.”

“Ron’s present is very dangerous,” Harry read, “so we’ve put a special covering on it. *Diffindo* should split the covering off, but please don’t touch the pointed end once you’ve done that. I know you survived it once, Harry, but I don’t know if Fawkes will come back to help you again...”

He lowered the letter, staring wide-eyed at Ron. “Fawkes,” he breathed. “The Chamber.”

Ron snatched out his box and tore it open.

A small, curved tooth, of a size to fit easily into Hermione’s palm, dropped onto the floor of the tent, its surface glistening weirdly.

“It is,” Hermione whispered. “It is—it’s a basilisk fang!”

“But it’s so small,” Ron objected. “It can’t have much in it.”

“Then you’ll have to make it count,” said Harry, reaching for the locket. “Want to have a go?”

“What, now?” Ron blanched. “But I thought we couldn’t open that thing.”

“It came to me just now, when I thought of the Chamber.” Harry looked at the locket, swinging innocently on its chain. “I have to tell it to open. In Parseltongue.”

Ron swallowed, following the back-and-forth path of the locket with his eyes.

“You said you wanted to kill it, Ron,” Hermione said softly. “You’ll never have a better chance.”

“You weren’t supposed to hear that,” Ron grumbled, but he drew his wand and pointed it at the fang. “*Diffindo* .” The covering split open and fell away, and he picked up the fang carefully by the blunt end. “Ready when you are, Harry.”

Harry set the locket on the floor beside the bed and planted his foot on the chain so that it could not escape. “*Open*, ” he commanded it, a hiss with a snarl at the end, and the locket’s catch snapped back instantly.

Hermione whimpered slightly and retreated around the side of the bed. Harry bit down on a yelp and forced himself to remain still. Ron shuddered but tightened his fingers around the fang.

Each side of the locket held an eye, a dark and piercing eye peering out at the world as the eyes of Tom Riddle had once peered from his handsome face.

“Stab it, Ron,” Harry said, leaning his whole weight on the chain. “Quick, before it—”

*“I know you, ”* hissed a voice from within the locket. *“I know you, Ronald Weasley, better than you know yourself, better than these two could ever know you—better than they have ever wished to know you— ”*

“Stab it!” Harry urged his friend, but Ron seemed frozen in place, staring at the eyes as though he, or they, were capable of Legilimency.

*“It was pure accident that you became friends with them both, ”* the voice whispered. *“Your mother’s and your brothers’ kindness, your need for a seat on the train, these are the only reasons Harry Potter ever befriended you—‘sheer dumb luck’, a Levitating Charm accidentally ended at just the right moment, placed Hermione Granger in your debt, making her feel as though she must be your friend— ”*

“LIAR!” Hermione screamed. “Ron, it’s lying, you know it’s lying, kill it now!”

*“So kind she is, ”* crooned the voice, *“too kind to speak her heart, too kind to acknowledge the truth—the truth, that all she feels for you is pity, pity for the one too weak to persevere as she did, pity for the one who comes crawling back and begging to be readmitted to his former fellowship— ”*

“I haven’t seen any begging or crawling around here,” Harry said loudly. “Ron, just stab it, it’ll keep going until you do—”

*“He cannot see what he does not look at, and when does he ever truly look at you? ”* the voice went on, inexorable, inescapable, and Ron trembled before it, his hand locked around his gift. *“When has he ever seen you as a person in your own right, instead of faithful follower where he leads, provider of a surrogate family, obstacle to the one he longs for in the night? For all his*

*solicitous words, he would trade you for her in an instant, send you to the fate the world thinks is yours and bring her here in your place, for without you to interfere, he could have at last what he truly wants, what he has wanted since he was twelve years old, what he was spared to want only by the tears of a phoenix... ”*

Ron looked from the fang in his hand to Harry and back again. He was shaking uncontrollably now, and his lips formed his sister’s name—his hand lifted above his head—

“Harry would give his life for Ginny,” said Hermione, her voice as anguished as Ron’s face. “Or for me, or for any of us. He’s proved it, over and over again. This thing’s lying to you, Ron—*send it to hell where it belongs!* ”

Ron screamed in fury and plunged the fang down, once, twice—Harry dodged backwards, yanking his feet out of the way, as a howl of inhuman rage reverberated through the tent—Hermione clapped her hands over her ears, screwing her eyes shut in pain—

The fang dropped from Ron’s limp hand to the floor, where it rolled a short way and came to rest against the shattered remains of the locket. The glass in both windows was gone, the silk lining tattered and scorched. Harry wrinkled his nose against the smell and slid off the bed to prop the tent flap open for a few moments.

“Hermione, you swore,” he heard Ron say behind him, unsteadily. “You never swear.”

“I do when the situation calls for it.” Hermione’s voice fluttered on the edge between laughter and tears. “I thought that one did.”

Something rustled in Harry’s hand. He looked down to discover he was still holding Luna’s letter. Rather than turn around and disturb Ron and Hermione, he held it up to the light and continued reading.

*If Ron’s already used his gift before you’ve opened yours, Harry, don’t worry too much. We might have a way to get you the sword...*

Harry turned carefully, bringing Luna’s box into his field of view. The smaller box with his name on it reposed innocently within, just the right size to contain a delicate golden cup.

“Luna, I’m going to want to meet this friend of yours at some point,” he muttered under his breath, then continued reading.

*...and also to make you feel a bit less left out. But you have to be willing to accept that you might have been wrong about something. I know it’s hard, but you’ll have to do it more than once if you want to win the war. Please do come to Hogsmeade, though. It would cheer everyone up just to know you’d been there, and that you’re making progress. Have a Happy Christmas and New Year, and I hope to see you before too long.*

*Your friend,*

*Luna*

Under this was the drawing he'd noticed earlier, a laughing, red-haired girl in Quidditch robes which matched the color of her almond-shaped eyes. Beside it, in a handwriting decidedly not Luna's, were four words so tiny that Harry had to squint at them even with his glasses on.

*Potter: Told you so.*

## Be Careful

### 58: How Much You Notice

Strange, random impressions flitted across Draco's mind as he lay silent in the dark.

*I thought I was supposed to see my life flash before my eyes? Or maybe that's not until I actually die. Think I'll wait a little while for it, thanks.*

The cloth holding his right arm to his side was smooth and fine against the backs of his fingers.

*Lucius probably insisted. Only the best for his son, traitor to the Dark Lord or not.*

He wore no robes, just soft trousers and a short-sleeved shirt.

*Maybe because I don't deserve to be called a wizard by their lights anymore?*

Whatever was lying across his legs was not only heavy but warm and breathing, and possessed of a familiar bony elbow, currently digging into his left thigh.

*Just like them. Tend to me, then toss Luna on top of me any old way.*

He squirmed his leg out of direct contact with the elbow's point, scowling as the effort made his heart race and the stump of his left arm throb with pain. Whether from the shock of the injury or from his all-encompassing fear, he was weak as a knitten.

*Funny, it almost feels like two people on me. Second one is small, not too heavy. Maybe he caught some Muggle kid who sneaked out to watch the house burn...*

A scent like candle smoke and pine needles hung in the air.

*Smoke is probably me, I did come from a fire. And pine... well, tomorrow's Christmas, or probably today by now, and no one stopped Mother from hanging those garlands in the hallway, even if I did see a few of the thicker types using them for target practice the other day.*

Another scream rang out, as if thinking of Narcissa had hurt her. Draco hissed in sympathy. *Whatever he's doing to her, it must be terrible. I wonder why he doesn't have me there to watch? Usually he wouldn't miss something so obvious...*

*Maybe he'll let me watch what he does to Lucius. I might actually enjoy that. He snorted*

sardonically. *Last thing I ever will enjoy—what happened after the Astronomy Tower will seem light compared to what I’ve got coming now—*

Terror drove a fist into his gut and dried his mouth as Draco recalled what, precisely, the Dark Lord had done to him after the Astronomy Tower.

*He used Legilimency. He looked into my mind and saw it all, saw everything. I tried to fight, I’ll try harder this time, but I know I can’t beat him. If he sees where I’ve been going, if he sees the otherworld and how happy they all are—if he sees he can get there just by holding onto me while I sleep—*

A moan forced its way past his lips, competing with the woman’s longest scream yet.

*It would mean I’d live. I might even be able to save Luna. But everyone else, everyone I love, they’ll all die, die or be Kissed or taken prisoner, and it’ll be my fault, my fault, all my fault—*

A door crashed open beyond his range of vision. Draco stiffened, clenching his teeth rather than let whoever had come in hear him crying like a baby.

*I’ll be screaming soon enough. No reason to start early.*

*“Draco!”*

The voice was feminine, anguished, and impossible.

*Going mad before the torture even starts. Good God, I’m pathetic...*

Lights sprang to life in front of him, many tiny twinkling points all at once, with one brighter source of illumination high up. Draco winced and half-shut his eyes, squinting to try to make out the shape of whatever the light was coming from. Roughly triangular, bits sticking out every which way, gleams of different-colored spheres and drapings of shimmering silver—

*I know what that is.*

*And there is absolutely, positively not one at Malfoy Manor.*

*I don’t think there ever has been.*

*Does this mean—could it be—*

“Beautiful, clever, maddening boy,” the voice spoke again, and its owner dropped to her knees in front of him, one hand pulling loose the bedsheet wrapped around him to free his arm while she stroked his cheek with the other. “You’re meant to despair *before* you’re saved, not *after!*”

“Mum,” Draco gasped out, and startled himself, if no one else, by bursting into tears.

*We made it. We weren’t caught after all. I must have finished the spell just in time...*

Mum was gently waking Abby and Luna from where they were sleeping across his legs, shooing them out of the room, telling Abby to “go see if there’s news,” kissing Luna on the forehead as she sometimes kissed Draco, before she returned to his side and helped him sit up. “What in the world were you thinking had happened?” she asked, sitting down on what Draco could now see was the longest of the couches in the front room of Fidelus Manor, then letting him lie down again, his head in her lap.

“Thought he’d caught us.” Draco rolled onto his side, shivering with reaction, and Mum tucked the sheet in around him before Summoning a blanket as well. “He was there, coming up the stairs, I didn’t know if I’d done the spell before I blacked out—the spell!” He craned his neck to look up at her. “Mum, it’s a waking transit, the time’s running one-to-one, we’ll be missed—”

“From what Luna told me of the situation, I assumed as much,” Mum said, sliding her hand under his shirt and onto his left shoulder, easing the throbbing pains running through his arm, even the part of it he didn’t have anymore. “After Andy and Aletha finished tending to you, I put you into a similar dream-trance to the one your spell induces, returned to Malfoy Manor with you, brought you out of it, and sent you to sleep to bring us back again. All, unless I’m very much mistaken, without you or anyone else knowing a thing about it. You could stay a week with us now and not be missed, and I think that is just what I may have you do.”

Draco nodded absently. Most of his attention was taken up by how good it felt to have his shoulder rubbed, how heavy his eyelids were growing again, how quiet everything was behind Mum’s voice...

“Who was screaming?” he asked, taking time out in the middle for a yawn. “What was happening to her? Why’d she stop?”

“I assume she stopped because what was happening to her was finished. As to what that was, and who she is—” Mum broke off and beckoned to someone Draco couldn’t see. “Why don’t you have a look for yourself.”

Moony walked into view, cradling a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms. As he went to one knee, Draco caught sight of a tiny, red face and a briefly waving fist. *Of course, of course, I’d almost forgot—Danger must have gone into labor while I was out—*

“Now, Jenny,” Moony said solemnly, “this is called a boy. They’re very dangerous and I want you to stay away from them, do you understand?”

Draco laughed. “I guess it’s a girl then?” he said, and was delighted to hear his voice sounding close to normal.

“Yes, Danger was right again.” Moony looked down tenderly at the baby in his arms. “Genevieve Katherine Beauvoi, but as you heard, everyone’s already calling her Jenny. A Christmas Eve baby, and all thanks to you, Draco. Though if it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer Danger not receive any more panicked firecalls late at night from old family friends reporting the sudden appearance of injured children on their bedroom floors.”

“Oops,” Draco said guiltily.

Mum slapped Moony on the shoulder. “Stop that, now, he’s in no condition for teasing. Go show off your daughter to all those men littering your kitchen, I’m sure that’s why they’re there—oh, and thank Sirius for me, his timing was more than usually excellent.”

“I’m going to assume he’ll understand that, since it means nothing to me.” Moony stood up smoothly, then paused. “I don’t suppose you’d like to hold her?”

“Oh, go on, then.” Mum held out her arms, and Moony set little Jenny in them with the greatest of care.

Draco pulled himself down the couch a short way to get a better look. Mum was dressed in soft cream robes today, he noticed belatedly, with a blue shawl over her shoulders. As she cradled the little girl and smiled down, crooning wordlessly, Moony stepped around behind her and gently lifted the shawl from its place, draping it over the back of her head so that it framed her face. Draco blinked at the picture thus created—he’d seen this before, and recently...

“Lie down, Draco,” Mum said softly without taking her gaze from the baby, as Moony slipped from the room. “Lie down and close your eyes. I have an early Christmas present for you.”

Draco obediently lay down, curling his legs a bit to fit into the available space. The last thing he saw as he closed his eyes was Mum’s hand coming towards his temple. It touched him—a brief instant of disorientation—

And he was wrapped in soft warm cloth and cradled in a strong supporting arm, with the face he loved best smiling down at him. Mum had linked his mind with Jenny’s, he realized distantly, allowed him to see and hear and feel everything that the baby did—

**I thought you might enjoy the experience, her voice murmured silently. Call it a rain date, since I never had the chance to hold you when you were an infant yourself.**

**I wouldn’t have remembered it anyway if you had, Draco thought back tentatively. But I do like it...** He trailed off in an enormous yawn, one echoed an instant later by Jenny.

**Go to sleep, Draco, Mum said, bending down to kiss Jenny’s forehead, and Draco’s by extension. You will still be here when you awaken, and we will have Christmas.**

**You don’t have to wait it for me...**

**No, but we will want to. Go to sleep.** Mum lifted her hand from his skin, breaking the connection between him and Jenny. “Sleep,” she murmured aloud. “You need to recover.”

“Yes, Mum,” Draco mumbled. Then he opened his eyes. “Before I do—”

“Yes?” Mum’s voice was tart, as if to say that this had best be the last of the interruptions.

“What does Sirius have to do with anything?”

“What does—oh.” Mum smiled. “Sirius is a male Heir of Ravenclaw, Draco. He cannot heal, as I can, but he can keep an injured person alive at need, and more importantly to us today, he can sense at a distance when someone is in need of healing. If he had not come through the Floo when he did, I would have thought you still asleep for hours, and you would have lain here in your fear...” She shivered slightly. “But you are safe now, and will soon be well again. Sleep, my love. Sleep.”

Draco returned her smile and closed his eyes again, feeling himself drift away.

*Safe. Home, and safe. And just in time for Christmas.*

In his dreams, he was Jenny again, or himself at Jenny’s size, and Mum held him close and smiled at him tenderly. A man who looked rather like Moony but had a stronger nose and darker hair looked over her shoulder and smiled as well, and he knew nothing could be wrong with the world when they were nearby.

*So this is what it’s like to have real parents.*

He had never pitied his old self more.

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Later, the Beauvois gathered beneath their tree to begin their Christmas Eve celebration. Cecy sat on the floor, her shawl still draped over her head and Jenny in her arms. Remus, in brown robes, stood behind her, holding a long staff. Ray and Neenie, likewise wearing brown, used their crooks to keep Abby, Dragon, and Nicki, all in fluffy white, in place. Jonathan stood to one side, dressed in shimmering silver.

One couch facing this tableau was occupied by Danger, who smiled at her younger children as they bounced eagerly where they sat. The other held Draco and Luna, the latter with a large book on her lap and her finger indicating the place where the former should start to read. Remus caught his eye and nodded.

Draco cleared his throat, a bit self-consciously, and began.

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a degree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be taxed...”

## Be Careful 59: What You Read

“Dumbledore and Grindelwald?” Harry said in a stunned voice. “Friends?”

He and Hermione were sitting across from one another with *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, which Hermione had accidentally carried away from Bathilda Bagshot’s house with her, between them. Ron, under the Invisibility Cloak, was in the village a few miles away, collecting hair from as many unsuspecting Muggles as he could manage while keeping all the strands separate. It was nearly noon on what some part of Harry still refused to believe was Christmas Day.

*Christmas is a Hogwarts feast, or Mrs. Weasley’s dinner at the Burrow. Crackers to pull and songs to sing and the twins playing jokes on anything that will hold still. Hagrid drinking too much eggnog, Professor McGonagall warding herself against mistletoe, Snape looking as if he’d rather the whole thing just went away.*

*Not finding out Dumbledore used to be friends with a Dark wizard.*

“Hermione, that doesn’t make sense,” he said. “Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald, even I know that.” He found a small smile, even if it felt too tight. “It’s on his Chocolate Frog card.” The smile fell away, and he let it. “How could they have been friends?”

Hermione lowered her eyes. “Some of the worst enemies are friends gone wrong,” she said softly. “And there’s something else.” She flipped open the book to a photograph. “Look here, at this letter. Look at the signature.”

Harry leaned in close, peering at the picture. Hermione lit her wand to give him a better look, and after a moment he nodded. “It’s that mark again,” he said, sitting up. “The one on your book, that you said was drawn in.”

“And it was on the gravestone in Godric’s Hollow, the one I thought said Potter—it was Peverell, Harry, the name was Ignotus Peverell, and it had this marking on it too—and I’ve seen it somewhere else, I just can’t think of where—”

“What can’t you think of?” said Ron, pulling off the Cloak as he came in. “I got twelve, I think that should be enough, we can always get more if we need them. Yes, I kept them separate,” he added before Hermione could say it. “Now what’s this you can’t think of? It must be something

important, you never forget stuff.”

“This.” Hermione sketched the symbol in the air with her wand, glowing lines hovering for a moment, then fading. “It’s in this book, it’s in mine, it was in the graveyard at Godric’s Hollow—”

“And it was somewhere we ought to go today.” Ron tossed Harry the Cloak. “Luna’s dad was wearing it at Bill and Fleur’s wedding, Krum had a fight with him over it, remember?”

“Of course!” Hermione thumped herself in the forehead with her hand. “I knew I’d seen it!”

“And Krum said it was Grindelwald’s mark,” Harry recalled dully. “It would make sense, then, for Dumbledore to be signing his letter with it. Since he was writing to Grindelwald.”

The part of his chest that had swelled with happiness at Ron’s return to them, at the death of Nagini, at the box that had indeed proved to contain Hufflepuff’s cup (which now reposed on a low table beside Harry’s and Ron’s bunks) was shriveled and cold at this latest revelation. He had trusted in Dumbledore, had set aside his whole life to follow Dumbledore’s nonsensical instructions, had suffered and struggled in the quest Dumbledore had left him. Discovering at this precise moment, when things seemed to be going well for the first time, just how imperfect Dumbledore had been seemed likely to pull him down.

“Harry, aren’t you taking this a bit hard?” Ron asked, flopping down in a chair. “I mean, Dumbledore was pretty young when he knew Grindelwald—”

“He was seventeen,” Harry said shortly. “He was our age.”

“Yeah, and we always make the smartest choices going, don’t we?” Ron retorted, pointing at himself. “People can change their minds, Harry. People can look at themselves in the mirror and be able to say, ‘Damn, that was stupid, maybe I should try something else tomorrow.’ Grindelwald was smooth, he was a fast talker by all the stories I ever heard, and Dumbledore met him right after his mum died. He probably got pulled in, Dumbledore did, and only came to his senses after whatever happened to his sister.”

Something about Ron’s last word caught at Harry’s mind. *Sister—his sister—my sister, if I had one—*

“Luna draws, doesn’t she?” he asked, getting up to fetch Luna’s letter from where it sat inside her box.

“Yes, she does,” Hermione confirmed. “She’s quite good, actually—oh!” Harry had unfolded the letter to expose the drawing at its bottom. “Harry, is that meant for your mum?”

“Can’t be,” said Ron, leaning over to see. “Harry’s mum never played Quidditch, and she wasn’t a Slytherin—”

He looked up at Harry, an expression composed of equal parts astonishment and horror sliding

onto his face, mirroring what Harry could feel on his own face.

“What’s the matter with you two?” Hermione asked, looking from one boy to the other.

“What Malfoy said to me,” said Ron weakly. “What he told me to tell Harry.”

“What, that his sister was—” Hermione broke off and looked at the picture again. “Oh,” she said. “Wait, there’s something written here, beside it—”

“I already read it,” Harry said. “It says, ‘Potter: Told you so.’ And it’s not in Luna’s writing, it looks like it might be a boy’s, but it’s not any I’d know.”

“Well, I’d hope not, if it was Malfoy writing it...” Hermione held out her hand, and Harry gave her the letter. She perused it for a few moments, then looked up, her face grave. “Luna really seems to want us to go to Hogsmeade,” she said. “She mentioned it twice. And she never put a name on this ‘friend’ of hers.”

“What, you think it’s Malfoy?” Ron scoffed. “Yeah, and Pansy Parkinson dates Muggles!”

“Ron, I’m serious!” Hermione shook the letter at him. “What if Luna was made to write this? What if it’s a trap? What if they’re waiting for us at her house, or in Hogsmeade?”

“There’s only one problem with that, Hermione,” Harry said, glancing over his shoulder at the innocent-looking cup sitting on the table. “If the letter’s a trap, why bother to send us a Horcrux with it? I doubt Vol—”

“Harry!”

“I doubt *that bastard*,” said Harry loudly, making Hermione frown and Ron grin, “would’ve approved. And it wasn’t just a Horcrux, it was a basilisk fang, one of the only things that can kill a Horcrux—and did, just not the one it was boxed up with—and a full batch of Polyjuice Potion you said yourself was perfectly good! If it’s a trap, it’s a sight fancier than anything we’ve seen so far, even last night, and let’s face it, we could use some good news here!” He was on his feet, pacing back and forth across the tent. “For all we know, Dumbledore set this up before he died so we’d have help along the way!”

“Do you really believe that, Harry?” Hermione asked softly. “Do you really believe even Dumbledore could have seen where we’d be so far in advance?”

“He must’ve known something, Hermione,” said Ron, producing the Deluminator. “Else why’d he leave me this? And you that book, with the rune or whatever it is inked in? It’s a puzzle, like the one you told me about solving first year with the seven bottles and the potions, except it’s loads more complicated than that, so it’s going to take longer.”

“And we need more information before we can figure it out.” Hermione nodded. “I know. But it seems so strange, and I don’t see how it could ever all fit together. Malfoy and Luna and Horcruxes and this...” She sketched the symbol again, this time with her finger instead of her

wand. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Neither did Sirius dragging Ron off to the Shrieking Shack third year,” Harry said. “Until we got in there, and heard the true story.”

His mind was clear now, his spirits had lifted again. It was indeed possible for people to change. He had proof in his own life. His father had been a bully at fifteen, Sirius had been a fool at sixteen, yet both of them had grown up to be good men who had done brave things.

*And Wormtail never broke a rule unless Dad and Sirius did it first and pushed him into it, and look what he went on to do.*

He looked up. “Let’s go see Luna’s dad,” he said. “He deserves to know she’s all right. And we’ll see what he can tell us about this.” He mimicked Hermione, drawing the symbol in the air. “Who knows, maybe it’s the one missing piece that will make it all make sense.”

“And maybe it’ll just make it make less sense, like usual,” said Ron. “All right, we should start outside Ottery St. Catchpole, I know they live north of there, Mum and Dad always point off that way when they’re talking about them...”

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Hermione Weasley, nee Beauvoi, adjusted the glasses on her nose fussily. She didn’t usually wear glasses, but these were special.

*They’re not for seeing better. They’re for seeing elsewhere. A very specific elsewhere.*

Before holidays started, she had bespelled the glasses and the white glove on her right hand to give her remote control over the TVP, still in its room at Hogwarts.

*Because I had a feeling things wouldn’t stop happening just because it was Christmas.*

Hermione tucked her feet more securely under her in the big chair and wiggled her fingers, activating the magic. A picture blinked to life on the lenses of the glasses, and voices began to speak through the earpieces.

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“—as a Resurrection Stone!” said Hermione Granger, waving her hands in the air. “You can’t bring people back to life, no spell can reawaken the dead!”

“I didn’t say it could!” Harry objected. “The story said the girl looked like she was beyond a veil, that doesn’t sound like she really came back, she was like an echo or a picture, but it would be better than nothing, wouldn’t it?”

“No, Harry, it wouldn’t!” Hermione moved across the floor of the tent and took Harry’s hands in hers. “I know you miss them,” she said softly. “I know you wish they were here. But think, Harry, really think—if we were supposed to be chasing the Deathly Hallows, if we were supposed to be

trying to conquer death, wouldn't Dumbledore have told us so?"

"Maybe he couldn't say it right out," Harry countered. "Maybe he wanted us to follow the signs. You heard what Mr. Lovegood said, it's a Quest, you've got to do it on your own. And Ron said Ollivander told him V—You-Know-Who," he hastily corrected at the look on Hermione's face, "wanted to know all about the Elder Wand—doesn't that mean we should be trying to find out about it too, to make sure he doesn't get it? He's powerful enough, Hermione, I don't want to find out what he'd be like with an unbeatable wand, especially since I'm the one who has to fight him —"

"Did either of you see this?" Ron interrupted from his chair in the corner, where he was rummaging in Luna's box. "This paper in here, it's not just scrap, there's stuff printed on it."

"Printed on it?" Hermione let go Harry's hands and came over to look, Harry following. "Like what?"

"I didn't get a chance to read it yet." Ron flattened one of the sheets and peered at it. "Looks like a list. Let me see if I can find the first piece." Two sheets later, he made a noise of satisfaction. "Here it is." Pressing the paper flat, he began to read aloud. "*Being an Evil Overlord seems to be a good career choice...*"

"What?" said Hermione shrilly.

Harry snorted with laughter. "Sounds like something Fred and George would've written after their career advice session," he said. "Go on, Ron, this should be good."

Ron found his place and continued. "*It pays well, there are all sorts of perks, and you can set your own hours. However, every Evil Overlord I've read about in books... invariably gets overthrown and destroyed in the end.*"

"Wish this was a book," said Harry a bit bleakly.

"*I've noticed that no matter whether they are barbarian lords, deranged wizards, mad scientists, or alien invaders, they always seem to make the same basic mistakes every single time...*" Ron frowned. "What's a scientist?"

"Someone who does experiments, who tries things out," said Hermione. "Never mind that now, keep going."

"*With that in mind, allow me to present... The Top 100 Things I'd Do If I Ever Became An Evil Overlord,*" Ron finished.

The three friends looked at each other for a moment. Harry cracked first, but Ron wasn't far behind, and Hermione's giggles got the better of her an instant later. "It's like an advice column!" she choked out. "Only it's not for just anyone..."

"There's a note on here," said Ron, recovering some of his breath. "*See number thirty-four.*" He

flipped to the second page, ran his finger down the column, blinked at what he found, and burst into guffaws.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

Ron handed over the page, pointing weakly at the guilty line.

“*Number thirty-four,*” read Harry. “*I will not turn into a snake. It never helps.*”

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Hermione Weasley tapped her glasses twice with a gloved finger, shutting off the exceptionally loud laughter in her ears. From her pocket, she withdrew a small metal object, which she flicked open to reveal a green flame. “Harry Potter,” she said clearly, and waited.

A moment later, Harry’s voice echoed out of the lighter. “Potter’s Broomspear Café. You kill it, we grill it.”

“Harry, that’s disgusting.”

“Happy Christmas to you too, Neenie. What’s going on?”

“Please tell me you didn’t ask Dudley to print out the Evil Overlord List and have Pansy owl it here for that box of Draco and Luna’s.”

“You want me to lie to you? On Christmas Day? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Hermione sagged back in her chair. “Goodbye, Harry,” she said, closing the lighter on his chuckle.

*Though if anyone would appreciate it, they would...*

## **Be Careful**

### **60: What You Accept**

“Does it hurt much, Draco?” Luna asked, laying delicate fingers against his arm. They were curled up together in one of the smaller rooms on the ground floor of Fidelus Manor, away from the bustle of Christmas Day but within call for things like dinner and carols.

“Probably not as much as it should. And with some extra luck, it would hurt even less.” Draco tilted his head soulfully towards Luna, who smiled and leaned in.

Halfway through the kiss, a fragment of memory came to Draco, and he had to pull away to avoid spitting on Luna.

“Is my kissing so funny?” she asked with a slightly offended air.

“No.” Draco caught his breath and focused on her to stop his laughter from returning just yet. “You reminded me of something that happened a long time ago, is all. Another of my stupid me tricks, back when I was still Draco Malfoy, Slytherin Poster Boy.”

Luna giggled at this. “How long ago is a long time? Was I at Hogwarts?”

“Yes, you’d have been a second year. I was third. It was my first year in Care of Magical Creatures, first class, actually, and I went and insulted a hippogriff, after we’d been specifically told they were proud.” Draco crooked his fingers and raked them downwards in a slashing motion. “Madam Pomfrey fixed it right up, of course, but I made out like it still hurt for weeks, and I specifically remember Pansy asking me about it in exactly the same words you just used. Except she didn’t really mean it, and you do...”

He trailed off, cupping his palm around the smooth, skin-covered knob which was now the end of his left arm. “I panicked that day,” he said. “And that was nothing, compared to this. There’s a part of my body missing—I should be taking this much worse than I am.”

“Maybe you’re happy to be alive,” Luna suggested. “Or maybe your mum is helping you.”

“Do I hear myself mentioned?” said Mum from the doorway.

“Someday I’m going to figure out how you do that.” Draco half-turned to see her. She carried a box about the size of a Beater’s bat in her arms, with an ornate envelope balanced on top. “Were you looking for us?”

“For you specifically, love. Will you excuse us for a time, Luna?”

“Of course.” Luna kissed Draco’s cheek, then left the room, shutting the door behind herself.

“What’s in there?” Draco asked as his mum sat down beside him, laying the box on the low table in front of the sofa.

“Presents, of a sort. But I feel I owe you an explanation first. Luna mentioned that she thought I might have helped you. May I know with what?”

Draco indicated his missing half-arm. “Did you do something about this?” he asked. “Because I ought to be a whole lot more upset, but instead it’s not even bothering me that I’m not upset. If that makes any sense...”

“Oh, it does.” Mum squeezed his hand once, then withdrew. “Yes, Draco. I did lay a temporary cushion around your emotions on this matter. I justified it with the perilous condition of your physical health—you had been bitten by a venomous snake, lost a limb, and done highly taxing magic in quick succession—and the need to keep you from spiraling downward. But such blocks are dangerous to leave for long periods, and now that you know about it, you might well break it yourself simply by worrying at it within your mind.”

Draco nodded. “Like picking a scab. You know you shouldn’t, but it’s so tempting.”

“Precisely.” Mum slid closer to him. “And like that, having this cushion removed will be painful. You will feel everything that you have not felt since you lost your arm, all at once. But I am here, and I will stay with you if you want me.”

“If I want you?” Draco laughed once. “I think it’s more a question of, are you going to be able to pry me off afterward. I know what I ought to be feeling about this, and it’s not pretty.”

“No, it is not. But pretty or ugly, I will stay with you through it all.” She put her arms around him, and he leaned into her shoulder, clasping her hand with his. “Tell me when you are ready.”

Draco swallowed once against a throat gone dry. “Go on,” he said, bracing himself.

Fingertips brushed his forehead.

*“Painful,” you said, Mum.*

*What masterful understatement.*

It was as if someone had invented a Cruciatus Curse for the mind. Fear, disgust, anger, revulsion, the feelings ricocheted and recombined within him too quickly to name or understand, shaking him like a jarvey with a gnome, like his Animagus form with a snake. The arms around him held him in place, held him together, as he fought to make some sense out of it all.

*My arm is gone. A piece of my body, a piece of me, is gone. Forever. And I did it. With my own*

*wand, my own magic, I maimed myself, I turned myself into a freak. Maybe it saved my life, but I'm a cripple now and always will be.*

*Not to mention, this means I can never go back. There's no possible way I can explain this one, what am I going to say, a hippogriff bit it off? When I wasn't even supposed to be out of the house, much less playing around with any spell that could have done this? And they'll want to know how it got so well healed, why it looks like it's been done a week instead of a day, and I won't have an answer they'd understand or even believe.*

*A smile touched his lips for an instant and was gone. Not that having to stay here forever is so bad. It's what I'm after, in the end. But this isn't the end yet, or it shouldn't be. I haven't done all I could to help Harry. I know the last Horcrux, I can get at it, and I had an idea about how to get him the sword too. Maybe Luna can sneak into Hogwarts and do those things for him, but maybe she can't.*

*Anger surged to the fore. Damn it, I wasn't done yet! I'd barely even started! And now I've ruined my chances of finishing the game, and for what? What did I get out of it? I mean, other than my life, and Luna's, and getting rid of a Horcrux...*

“Do you want an answer to that question?” murmured a voice close to his ear.

“Was I talking aloud again?”

“Only a sentence or two.” Mum freed a hand to stroke his hair, laying her cheek against his head for a moment before continuing to caress him. “I have been able to follow the general course of your feelings, and they are what I expected, but there is one benefit to what has happened that I do not believe you have quite realized yet.”

“Enlighten me.” Draco deliberately overdid the drawling tones of proper pureblood boredom. A chuckle rewarded him, and the smile that came in answer to it lingered for a few moments more than its predecessor.

*Maybe I'll get over this after all.*

“You recall what concerned me most greatly about your magical health when we first met,” Mum said, twining a piece of his hair around her fingers.

“Of course. My Mark.”

“Yes. Its darkness was beginning to encroach upon your own magic, to stain your soul. But as you grew stronger under our influence, you fought it more successfully, until when I last saw you the darkness was nearly undetectable. It was still present, certainly, but it was concentrated in the brand on your arm. Nowhere else within you.” A hand slid down to his chin and cupped it, lifting his face so that he could see her smile. “Do you understand yet?”

Draco opened his mouth to say no and stopped halfway to forming the word.

*All the Dark magic on me was in my Mark.*

*My Mark was on my left arm.*

*And my left arm is no longer with us.*

Mum's smile grew warmer. "You do understand. I thought you might." Her fingers caressed the spot Luna had touched earlier. "You have paid a high price, Draco, but you are magically free of your 'master.'"

*Snape must've taught her how to do sarcasm. She sounds just like him.*

That should disturb him far more than it did, Draco knew, but he couldn't find anything left over from his earlier storm of feelings and his current tired exaltation.

*There wasn't supposed to be any way to get out once you were Marked. It was supposed to last forever, the way he wants to live forever.*

*But I found a way around one of those.*

*Maybe I can still help fix the other one too.*

"I almost don't want to ask," he began hesitantly.

"Ask anyway." Mum smoothed his hair and nudged him into sitting more upright.

"You said yesterday I could stay a week without anyone noticing I was gone back home." Draco rearranged his legs under him, searching for the right words. "That sounds like you think I'm going to be able to go back."

"Why would you not?"

Draco favored his mum with a variant of the look of intolerance for stupidity he used most often for Ron. She only laughed. "Shall I show you one of your presents now?" she asked when she was done.

"If you like."

Mum leaned forward and opened the box on the table, lifting out what looked like a block of wood, about eighteen inches long and six inches wide by six deep. Draco reached out to touch it, then jerked his hand back.

"Is something wrong?" Mum inquired.

"It's alive!" Draco laid his hand on it again, more hesitantly. The flat surface of the—whatever-it-was—held all the softness, the slight give, even the warmth of a living being. "What *is* it?"

“We call it ferecarne.” Her pronunciation gave the word four syllables, accenting the second to last. “I am sure you mistook it for wood at first, and it begins as wood, but the trees from which it comes have never known the outdoors. They are nurtured in a Healer’s workroom, and live on a mixture of three potions. As you have discovered for yourself, their purpose is to give the wood the appearance and feel of human flesh.”

“Weird.” Draco took his hand away. “What’s it used for?”

Mum drew her wand and pointed it at the ferecarne, a crease appearing between her eyebrows as she concentrated. The block wobbled for an instant, then shrank and twisted in on itself—

And a forearm and hand lay where the block had been, an exact mirror image of Draco’s right arm. Pale blond down sprouted on the back of the arm and hand as he watched, and the fingernails developed slightly ragged edges. “Mum,” he protested. “I haven’t been!”

Chuckling, Mum twitched her wand, and the nails smoothed out once more. “So much, any trained witch or wizard may do,” she said. “One who knows the spells, at least. But to fit the prosthetic and make it obey the body’s signals, that requires a Healer.”

“Hmm, a Healer.” Draco rubbed his lips thoughtfully, trying to disguise his rising glee. *I’ll be able to go back after all, finish what I started...* “Wonder if we know any of those?”

Mum flicked the side of his head. “If you wish to have two functional hands in time to applaud Abigail’s exhibition tonight, I suggest you stop being silly long enough to let me do my job.”

“Yes, Mum,” Draco said obediently, shifting himself around so that she could get at his left side. “What do I have to do?”

“Hold still, to begin with.” Mum lifted the prosthetic arm with her own left hand, her wand in her right reshaping its top. “You will need to take some care with this, Draco—the magic which holds it in place will not withstand any spell which would have injured your original arm badly enough to make you lose the use of it. I will teach you the spell to reattach it, of course, and the one to release it without damage, but I thought you should be warned.”

“Thanks for that.” Draco watched as the ferecarne arm developed an elbow and a cup-shaped depression just above it. “Do I have a dirty mind if...”

“Yes.”

“Thought so.”

The ferecarne closed around the remains of his arm, and Draco stifled a shudder. There was no reason for it, really—it was very like the feeling he’d had from touching the stump with his own hand—but knowing there was a magical creation affixed to his body made his spine prickle and his hair itch.

“Now,” Mum said, putting her wand away, “you have a decision to make. I can give this arm the

treatment that any Healer could give. That will allow it to move as you wish, but you will have no feeling in it and it will always be more clumsy than your other. Or I can use my own magic, and see if I can convince your mind to receive signals from this arm as it does from the rest of your body. You will take longer to learn to use it again, and it will feel very strange to you at times, but if it works as I think it will, when you are through, there will be little to say this is not the arm you lost. What do you say?"

"I say..." Draco ran his hand along the place where the ferecarne blended with his skin, feeling no difference in his fingertips. "I say I have a star of a mum." He arranged his left arm around her, then hugged her with his right, making her laugh again. "I'll try it if you will."

"Very well." Mum laid her right hand against his left upper arm and began to stroke her left forefinger against the fingertips of his lax left hand. "Tell me when you begin to feel this..."

Nearly three hours later, she called a halt. "We will work more on it tomorrow," she promised when Draco pouted. "I have another gift I hoped you would open tonight."

"Well, when you put it that way." Draco lowered his left arm to the couch beside him, moving with deliberation in case the ferecarne misunderstood his intentions, as had happened several times already, and flung his hand out as though signaling the Knight Bus or trying to catch a Snitch. "Is that it in the envelope there?"

"It is." Mum picked it up and handed it to him. "And I am afraid your work is not yet done for the day. This gift also requires a decision from you."

"You just love working me to death, don't you?" Draco gripped the envelope in his left hand and tore it open with his right, then pulled out the neatly lettered sheet of parchment within. "What do I have to do with..."

He turned it over to read it, and his last word went unsaid.

*I, Cecilia Mariana Black, being of sound mind and body and full age of adulthood, do, on this day, the twenty-fifth of December, 1997, take Draco Lucius Malfoy to be my lawful son, heir to all I possess, and in token of this do I of my own free will here sign my name.*

Mum's signature, the rusty brown of dried blood, filled the next line. There was another section below, but Draco didn't bother to read it. He knew what it said.

"What did you think the answer was going to be?" he said, looking up at his mum without shame for the blurring of his vision, since he could see her eyes shining with the same joy he knew filled his own. "No?"

"It is always polite to ask." Mum drew a sharp black quill from her pocket. "Still, I will admit to having very little doubt of your response."

Draco set the contract on its envelope and accepted the Contract Quill. Steadying the parchment

with his left hand, he signed his full name at the bottom with his right, ignoring the pain like a knife across the back of that hand.

*Anything worth doing hurts.*

*And making myself a place in this world is most definitely worth doing.*

## **Be Careful**

### **61: What You Sense**

“So, what’s it like?” Abby asked, watching Draco practice reaching for things with his left hand.

“What’s what like?”

“Having your arm missing like that and getting a new one.”

Draco turned to look at her where she was sitting on his bed. “Have you ever heard of tact?”

“Is it one of those things like manners that I don’t have?”

Draco sighed. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, it is.”

“Okay.” Abby observed him for a few seconds silently. “So, what’s it like?”

Draco picked up a piece of scrap parchment, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it at her. She giggled and ducked as it missed by several feet.

“Never very good with that hand anyway,” Draco muttered without much heat. “But one of these days you’re going to get yourself ducked in a pond.”

“I wouldn’t mind, so long as it was a nice hot day. And the pond was clean, not mucky and full of ick.” Abby pulled a face. “I don’t want to get ick in my hair.”

“You shouldn’t tell him those things, you know,” said Luna from the door. “He’ll remember, and then one day when you’re not looking he’ll set it up so that you do get ick in your hair.”

Draco drew himself up. “Here now! That is a base slander and I resent it heartily!”

Luna shook her head. “It can only be slander if it isn’t true,” she said. “And with Ray and his father downstairs trying to figure out what hit them, I think it is true.”

“Oh, did Mum finally trigger that?” Draco laughed. “Come on, Abby, you’ll want to see this.”

“What?” Abby asked eagerly, sliding off the bed and following Draco and Luna into the hall.

“Well, Ray was a prat and shoved me out of bed my first morning back to school.” Draco

stretched up with his left arm to touch the top of the doors as he passed them. “And instead of just pretending I was running late for the show, Moony told Mum I couldn’t stay to watch, which she thought meant I’d gone and not that I was in it. So we owed them both a little payback.”

“I like payback.” Abby bounced on her toes. “As long as it’s not to me. What did you do to them?”

“Ah, ah, no spoilers,” Draco admonished. “Wait until you see it. And there will be payback coming to you, for what you pulled last night.”

“I thought it was very sweet of her to sing that to you,” said Luna. “I don’t know how true it is, but it was sweet.”

Abby pouted. “It’s true enough. I wouldn’t have had a good Christmas at all without my Draco.”

“Yes, but... *all* you want?” said Draco, grinning at her over his shoulder. “You seemed happy enough to see those presents with your name on them.”

The pout intensified, accompanied by a stamped foot. “Stop teasing me! I was trying to be nice and sing you my favorite Christmas song and you’re making fun of me for it when I practiced for weeks and weeks and—EEK! PUT ME DOWN!”

Draco frowned, adjusting Abby’s position on his shoulder as she kicked and squealed. “Down?” he said, affecting the manner of his own world’s Crabbe and Goyle. “Er, what’s down?”

“This is down, dear,” said Luna gently, pointing towards the stairs. “Come with me, I’ll lead you down.”

“Aw, thanks.” Draco beamed at her with such idiotic vigor that Abby, squirming around to where she could get a glimpse of his face, started to giggle, and by the time the three reached the main floor they were all laughing.

This made them fit in well with the rest of the Beauvois, who were sitting in the room with the Christmas tree watching Ray and Moony circle each other like a pair of strange dogs. Occasionally, one of them would reach out tentatively toward the other, then retreat, shaking his head. Both of them shot frequent murderous glances at Draco’s Mum, who was sitting in an armchair cradling little Jenny and smiling beatifically.

“That’ll teach you to tease a Healer,” Danger remarked from her place on the couch.

“What will, Mummy?” Abby asked as Draco set her on her feet again.

“This,” said Moony darkly.

In Ray’s voice.

The younger Beauvois howled with laughter as Ray rubbed his hands down his face. “So strange,” he said in Moony’s voice. “I know what I ought to sound like, and that isn’t it.”

“You’ve got nothing to complain about,” said Ray, glaring at himself/his father. “You weren’t the one kissing Mum when we switched over!”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes, I was...” The rest of Moony’s sentence went unheard as fresh laughter drowned it out.

Draco sat down on the floor beside Danger’s couch, Luna disposing herself comfortably beside him. There was a gentle tug on his collar as Danger fixed some small problem with its alignment, and he turned his head to smile thanks at her. Abby, he noticed in passing, had gone to sit on the arm of Mum’s chair and watch her new sister sleep.

*So I’m surrounded by beautiful women, they helped me get revenge on the people who played tricks on me, and I don’t have to go home for four more days.* He ran his fingers through Luna’s hair, enjoying the faint floral scent that wafted from it. *What else could a wizard wish for?*

---

*I wish I knew more about who Luna’s with.*

Harry looked again at the drawing of the red-haired, laughing girl in green Quidditch robes that adorned the bottom of his letter from his Ravenclaw friend. He’d thought, at first, that it was just there to take up the parchment Luna hadn’t used for writing, but it seemed there was another reason for it. Xenophilius Lovegood had been deeply affected by the picture, and by the similar sketches that covered his letter from Luna, needing to sit down before he fell.

“You know Luna,” he said, looking searchingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione in turn with the eye that wasn’t pointing at the tip of his nose. “You must understand this about her. She would never indulge in her artwork unless she felt truly safe in her surroundings and her companions. I must assume she has found an unexpected friend.” He smiled, both eyes misty. “She is very like her mother in that way.”

Knowing his daughter was safe, or at least that she felt safe—“With Luna’s grasp on reality, the one’s not necessarily the other,” as Hermione said when they were alone—Xenophilius became a genial host, offering the friends Gurdyroot infusion to drink and trying to press them to stay to dinner. The combination of the taste of Gurdyroots and the knowledge that dinner would feature Freshwater Plimpy soup made refusing the easiest choice any of them had made for quite some time.

“Luna wanted you to go into hiding as soon as you could,” Harry hinted delicately, and Xenophilius agreed that he should hurry, to be sure of getting safely away before any Death Eaters decided to come check on him. Still, he seemed to want to bring everything in his junk-filled house with him, and it was nearly two hours later when he finally tottered out the door under the weight of a lopsided, bulging knapsack. Ron handed him a note, grinning.

“No Death Eater’d know what’s in here,” he said. “It’ll get you in the door.”

“What in the world did you write?” Hermione asked as they watched Xenophilius down the lane,

to make sure he didn't fall.

"The date and time I first walked in on Mum and Dad..." Ron coughed, his ears reddening. "Yes. Well."

Harry snickered, and Hermione covered a smile.

*So Luna and her dad are both safe. But for Luna, we still don't know why, or how. Harry peered again at the tiny words beside the picture. Putting together this and what happened to Ron, it almost has to be Malfoy, but that doesn't make any sense. There's enough bad blood between us and him to poison every vampire in the world. Why would he help us now?*

The question was unanswerable. Harry moved on to another one. *What does this bit mean, about accepting I was wrong? I've been wrong about a lot of things. Sometimes I just get embarrassed, but sometimes people get killed. Sirius' face flashed across his memory, frozen in mingled surprise and fear. Or come into danger when they could be safe.* He glanced at Ron and Hermione, quarrelling amiably over the preparations for dinner. *I'm not accepting that one, Luna, no matter what.*

"But you already have," he could almost hear her reply. "You've let them come with you."

*Only because I couldn't stop them.*

"Then maybe there's someone else you won't be able to stop. Or won't want to." A giggle, as distinct in Harry's ears as though Luna were actually sitting across the table from him. "Why don't you come to Hogsmeade and find out?"

"Someone else?" Harry repeated aloud, his eyes still on the picture at the bottom of the letter.

"What?" said Hermione, turning around.

"Nothing." Harry folded the letter and stood up. "What do you think about going to Hogsmeade for the January weekend?"

Hermione frowned. "I don't know, Harry, I still think it could be dangerous. What if they know we're coming?"

"Come on, Hermione, you heard Lovegood," said Ron, setting down the pot he was holding. "Luna wouldn't draw unless she was happy, and she may be a bit mad but she's not about to fall for a Death Eater. She must have got away, or found a sympathizer for our side or something. Maybe the Order had another spy, who knows?"

"Besides, no Death Eater would send us the rest of what was in that package," said Harry, nodding to the cup sitting at the bottom of his bed. "I'll stay under the Cloak, you two can grab Slytherins to use for Polyjuice once we get there."

"We'll have to take their clothes too," Hermione said, her love of a new problem to think about

overcoming her worries about it as always. “Ours won’t fit, and besides we have all Gryffindor crests on everything...”

Ron laughed. “Not even Fred and George ever sent Slytherins back from Hogsmeade in just their pants,” he said. “Shame we won’t be able to get credit for it.”

“We will,” Harry said, returning his friend’s grin. “Someday.”

*After the war is over. After we find the last piece of the puzzle.*

*Whatever that may be.*

---

“That was very naughty of you,” said Starwing to her counterpart, beaming. “Nicely done.”

Draco had been equal parts embarrassed and gratified to discover that not only were Ray (restored to his own body after promising never to be mean to Draco again) and Neenie staying home from the ball at the Potters’, but the rest of their friends were coming to Fidelus Manor instead, to spend a quiet evening with Draco and Luna.

*I suppose that’s what friends do. If they know you’re not up to coming out, they’ll stay in with you.*

Neenie’s portable TVP had been expanded with a few quick spells, and Luna had discovered that if she held Harry’s hand while he worked the magical device, the Harry in the picture seemed to be able to hear her speak.

“But it might only have been because he was already thinking of me,” she said as Harry peeled off the white glove, breaking the connection and making the picture on the wall disappear. “We can’t be sure.”

“There’s something I’ve been wondering about,” said Neville. “You had to go to the Room of Hiding to get the cup, didn’t you? Why not take the diadem while you were there, and send them everything at once?”

“You mean I didn’t tell you this story?” Draco blinked. “I was sure I had.”

Shaking heads greeted him.

“Well, then.” He rearranged his position on the big armchair to make room for Luna as she joined him. “Answer in two words: Headmaster Snape. Answer in more words than that...”

---

“I like it in here,” said Luna softly, looking around at the heaps of things that someone, sometime, had thought needed to be hidden. “It reminds me of home.”

“Well, don’t get too comfortable. We’re not staying long.” Draco pulled open the doors of the

cupboard which was topped by the bust of the pockmarked warlock and lifted out Hufflepuff's cup and the scribbled-up copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. "Bag, please?"

Luna held it up. "Bag, thank you."

Draco set the two items within it and was just reaching up for the diadem when the sound of rubbish being knocked over and a man's curse assaulted his ears.

*Who in the world—*

Luna gasped. "Snape!" she mouthed at him.

Draco swore under his breath and grabbed Luna around the waist, pulling her down behind the nearest pile of objects just as a beam of wandlight stabbed through the place where they'd been standing a moment before.

*For someone who's on the same side I am, Headmaster, you certainly get in the way a lot, he thought virulently as Snape stalked into view, breathing heavily and glowering around as though daring the inoffensive items to attack him. Couldn't just let me get on with things, no, you had to come see who was in your precious school, and if you catch me I'm going to cast first and ask questions later...*

But Snape did not seem inclined to search very hard for intruders, though he did take a careful look around the small clearing where the cupboard sat. Draco would have bet good money that the Headmaster could have reproduced, in writing, a fair description of everything visible from where he was standing.

*And he's got a nasty suspicious mind, which means he'll come back in a few days and see if anything's gone. Which means we can't take the diadem, because he will notice. Damn it.*

After one more poisonous glare around himself, Snape turned on his heel and left, and Draco could let out the breath he'd been holding. *Not even getting to help Mum decorate three whole batches of cookies, with the promise of more to come, makes up for getting a scare like that on the day before the day before Christmas.*

"I wonder how he knew we were here?" Luna asked, her voice covered by the sound of the door closing.

Draco shrugged. "He's the Head. All the portraits report to him, the house-elves, the suits of armor even."

"And the tapestries? Like the one across from the door?"

"Probably." Shoving the bag inside his robes, Draco stood up and helped Luna do the same. "Doesn't matter now. Let's find somewhere to fall asleep, so we can get back before Ray and Jonathan eat all those cookies we fixed."

---

“So you’re going to have to wait until Snape isn’t suspicious anymore to get the diadem?” said Ginny. “Good luck with that.”

“Thanks.” Draco grimaced. “I’m going to need it.”

---

Severus Snape sat alone in his office, staring at the coals of his fire.

His actions on the twenty-third of December still gave him pause. He had intended to search every corner of the Room of Hidden Things to find whoever had brought a woven troll in pink shambling into the portrait of Dilys Derwent, waving its club in alarm. But a chance breath at just the wrong, or just the right, moment had tantalized his nose with a scent that could not possibly be there, and he had refrained from looking any further.

*Though whether that was for fear of what I would find, or fear of what I would not, I have no idea.*

Trying to free his mind from the certainty that he knew the perfume which had hung on the air in the vaulted room, he went to the fireplace and blew on the coals. They flared up, none brighter than a vaguely oval section in the center. A bit of imagination endowed it with soft blonde hair, merry blue eyes, a warm smile...

Severus shut his eyes, trying to banish the vision, but the face only hung brighter before him, and now he seemed to see its owner dressed in soft blue, twirling about a dance floor in the arms of a dark and handsome gallant, laughing in reply to his sallies.

*My love, my love, must you haunt me even in my own world?*

He was careful not to speak the question aloud. The possibility of an answer, at a moment like this one, was all too great.

## Be Careful 62: How Much You Learn

“Neville! Over here!”

Neville hurried down platform nine and three-quarters towards Ginny, who was waving at him urgently. Her parents were standing behind her, Mr. Weasley looking tired but relieved, Mrs. Weasley red-eyed but smiling. He nodded to them politely and took the slip of parchment Ginny thrust into his hand.

The date and time scribbled at the top meant nothing to him, but the cryptic words underneath, as well as the familiar handwriting, got his full attention.

*I got over it. Close call Christmas Eve but all well and making progress. Take care.*

“Nice of your brother to write to you,” Neville said as calmly as he could manage, handing Ginny back Ron’s note.

“Yes, it was, wasn’t it?” Ginny’s eyes glowed with the jubilation she didn’t dare show any other way. “He forgets so often, it’s good that he remembered for once. And it was very thoughtful of him to tell us his friends are doing well.”

*To tell us they’re alive, Neville had no trouble interpreting. To tell us they’re still out there fighting, that they’re doing whatever they have to do to win the war. To tell us they’re thinking of us.*

*To tell us they’ll come back when it’s time.*

“There’s also who he sent it by,” said Mrs. Weasley, just as the whistle blew. “But Ginny can tell you that—hurry, get aboard—”

“Be careful this term,” Mr. Weasley added quietly. “They’re looking for excuses to hurt you. Don’t give them any.”

Ginny hugged her parents, Neville shook their hands, and the two scrambled onto the train, Ginny’s trunk held between them, just as it began to move.

“I’m down a couple cars from here,” said Neville, pointing with his head. “Got a compartment to myself. Come in with me?”

“Yes, please.” Ginny shifted her grip on the trunk and drew her wand. “Here, I’m allowed to do this again now. *Wingardium Leviosa*. ”

Neville sighed in relief and let go of the handle as the trunk floated up to knee-height. “This way,” he said, opening the door to the next car. “And then you can tell me who brought you that note.”

---

To pass the time until his quarry came into range, Draco was doing agility training with his new hand. Of course, to any passerby, it would have looked as though he was playing with the Galleon he’d got from his Aunt Bella’s Gringotts vault, the same way he’d done all through the latter half of the fall term.

*And I don’t intend to let anyone close enough to see that it’s not the same one.*

*Or rather, I only intend to let a couple people see.*

*The ones who need to know.*

He balanced Luna’s DA Galleon on his left thumb and flicked it into the air, catching the fake coin in his fake palm with a satisfying *Thwup* . It reminded him of the sound made by the spell he’d left active in his bedroom at Malfoy Manor.

*Not even to keep my cover going was I about to leave Luna there without me. And she wasn’t too keen on the idea of staying behind either.* Draco flipped the coin again, fancying he could see a familiar face in its glittering gyrations. *Neenie and her amazing powers of logic to the rescue...*

---

“You have to think like a Death Eater,” Neenie explained, her hands turning pages in the large book on her lap apparently independent of her eyes or mind. “They wanted Luna so that her dad would stop writing articles about supporting Harry—right, Luna?”

Luna nodded. “They were quite rude when they first took me, but that was just what they do to everyone,” she said. “It wasn’t personal.”

“So now your dad’s gone into hiding.” Neenie glanced down at the book and kept flipping. “They can’t pressure him anymore, but they have what they wanted. *The Quibbler* is silenced. They aren’t going to let you go, but as long as your dad keeps his head down they won’t have any use for you either. Which means they’ll leave you alone.”

“Unless one of them decides he can take her for some fun,” said Draco darkly. “I’m not risking that.”

“You won’t have to. Here.” The book was rotated to face Draco and Luna. “A Spell to Produce the Illusion of a Presence in an Otherwise Empty Room. If you cast this over your bedroom, there’ll be footsteps pacing back and forth, the toilet will flush a couple times a day, you could even throw in a little crying if you thought it was necessary. And Fred and George sell a Food-Vanishing Plate

for disgusting family dinners, I'm sure you can swap it in for whatever they'll be using to feed her. As long as you make it clear she's yours and not to be bothered, they won't ever check on her, because where else could she be?"

Draco frowned. "I'm still missing a step here. Where else *is* she going to be?"

Both girls burst into laughter. Draco folded his arms and waited it out.

"I'll be at Hogwarts," said Luna when she had caught her breath. "I have to get my education, you know."

"What do you mean you'll be at—oh."

"Yes, at 'oh,'" Neenie said, still giggling. "If 'oh' means our Hogwarts. There's plenty of room in Ravenclaw Tower, and we can go to Diagon Alley any time after the New Year."

"I should have thought of that." Draco shook his head. "Are we sure it's only my arm I lost and not my brain?"

"You mean you had a brain?" Neenie affected shock, and Luna laughed again.

"I get no respect," Draco muttered.

Neenie drew herself up. "That," she said with dignity, "is because respect has to be earned."

---

*But for all her joking around, she does respect me. They all do.* Draco rubbed the invisible join between the ferecarne and his own skin ruefully. *I could wish it was for something other than this, but that's life.*

*And really, it isn't for this at all—it's for my coming back after that happened. For my being willing to go on.*

*For that, I think I may even respect myself.*

*What a novel idea.*

The far door of the car opened. Draco resumed playing with his Galleon, pretending not to see who was coming.

"Do you *mind*?" said Ginny Weasley, her tone the icy calm that only strangled rage could produce.

"Mind what?" Draco looked up. "Oh, hello, Weaslette. Longbottom. Have a nice holiday?" He flipped the Galleon again. Neville's and Ginny's eyes followed its path through the air. "Mine was full of surprises. How about yours?"

“Over,” said Neville flatly. “Now if you wouldn’t mind moving, we’re trying to get to our compartment.”

“Oh, so sorry.” Draco stepped aside, tossing the Galleon yet again. “Let me just—oops.” He missed his catch, and the coin clattered to the floor at Ginny’s feet. Automatically, she stooped to pick it up.

*Perfect. Now just let her notice...*

Ginny stiffened, then shot upright. “Where did you get this?” she demanded, holding up the Galleon in a clutch so fierce her knuckles had turned white. “Who did you take it from?”

“That’s a rather loaded question, isn’t it?” Draco leaned comfortably against the wall. “As it happens, it was a gift. And I’ll have it back now.” He held out his hand.

Ginny closed her own hand over the coin. “No, you won’t,” she said coldly. “There’s no way this could have been a gift, Malfoy. You stole it.”

“So you’re going to steal it back from me? Two wrongs make a right? I don’t think so, Weaslette. Give it here.” Draco was enjoying himself; the hardest part of the conversation so far was keeping a straight face.

*I’ve finally found what I was born for. Being a pureblood bastard, but with a purpose.*

“Why not see if you can make it through your first day back without a detention?” he added for good measure. “Even Potter could usually manage that much.”

Neville caught Ginny’s eye and nodded towards Draco. She growled under her breath, then slapped the coin into his hand unnecessarily hard. “You keep your filthy mouth off Harry,” she hissed. “He’ll be back soon enough, and when he is...”

“He’ll defeat the Dark Lord and there will be much rejoicing,” Draco finished in a bored tone. “And we’ll all live happily ever after—oh, wait, not me, I’m on the wrong side. But you will.” He flipped the Galleon one last time, caught it in the air, and tucked it away in his pocket. “If you survive that long.”

“Is that a threat, Malfoy?” Neville said, interposing himself between Draco and Ginny, who had bristled at Draco’s last phrase.

“Call it a warning.” Draco brushed an invisible piece of lint from the shoulder of his robes. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’m getting tired of seeing you in Dark Arts. If you have to pick a fight with someone this term, pick it with Snape. Give him something to do thinking up new punishments for you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s a seat and a book with my name on them.”

And with a small bow, Draco slipped between the staring Neville and the open-mouthed Ginny and was on his way down the corridor.

*I hope you were listening, he thought back towards the two Gryffindors. Sooner or later, even the Carrows are going to realize they need to get rid of you permanently. And killing you is probably the nicest way they could do that. I don't want to think about some of the others.*

*Of course, if what Luna helped me work out comes off, there'll only be one of you left for me to worry about. His mind supplied the flickering images of the TVP, projected onto the wall of the room at Fidelus Manor that his friends had made their own for the holidays. So clever of her to suggest we have a look back in time, to make sure we knew the whole story before we went on...*

---

“I am going to *kill* him,” Ginny snarled when she and Neville were alone in the compartment. “I want him *dead*. ”

“Why?” Neville asked, finishing the Imperturbable Charm he was setting on the door.

“He’s messing with people’s *lives* , Neville. This—” Ginny flourished Ron’s note. “—Luna’s dad brought it to us! Saying Harry and Ron and Hermione had come to his house with a letter from Luna, a letter that said she was safe!”

“So maybe she’s safe,” Neville suggested, sitting down. “She sent that same message from her Galleon the first day of holidays, remember?”

“Yes, well, there’s only one problem with that.” Ginny’s hands tightened into fists. “We can’t see who’s sending the messages on the Galleon; we have to take it on trust that they’re from the person they say they are. And that was her Galleon Malfoy was playing with, out in the hall. Just like he’s playing with us. Giving us advice, pretending to care if we get hurt...” She shut her eyes and leaned against the back of the seat. “I wish it was over,” she said indistinctly. “I don’t care how anymore, I just want it to be over.”

Neville swallowed hard. If even Ginny was losing faith, things were not going to be easy this term.

*And they were hard enough in the fall.*

“It was good advice, though,” he said, hoping this would be a neutral enough topic of conversation. “The Carrows like watching people bleed, but Snape doesn’t seem to want to hurt us, just humiliate us. What can we do that only he could deal with?”

Ginny shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know. Break into his office again?”

“That would work.” Neville dug through his pockets until he found a small scroll and a quill. “Let’s see if we can’t think of a way to get the password before the lunch cart comes around.”

---

Watching her friends in the TVP, Luna smiled. “That’s right,” she murmured, sharing a smile with Ginny as the latter speeded up the scene to one and a half times. “You need to get inside the Head’s office. And once you’re there, you need to steal something. It should be easy to carry, but

very important, and it should belong to the school so much that only the Headmaster himself can properly punish you for stealing it...”

## Be Careful 63: What Pieces You See

Draco sipped his pumpkin juice and watched the high table out of the corner of his eye. If Professor McGonagall wasn't using every speck of her self-control to keep herself from murdering Alecto Carrow, it was only because she had to save a little to let Amycus live.

*And how she's managed to not attack Snape all this time, after he killed Dumbledore and pulled the Head's chair out from under her, God only knows.*

Snape himself was watching the Gryffindor table, which buzzed with chatter as the news of Ron's note traveled up and down its length. The Ravenclaws were whispering as well, and Draco had been on the receiving end of several nasty looks from the older girls. It seemed Ginny had spread the word about Luna.

*Oh, so it was perfectly fine for you to call her names and steal her things, but when I come into the picture, then suddenly you care about her...*

Granted, what he was supposed to have done was a couple orders of magnitude worse than petty theft or teasing, but it was the concept that mattered.

*Still, the way things are running, they won't dare try to get back at me for it. As long as I keep my wits about me, I should be fine.*

Under the table, he crossed his fingers.

*I hope.*

---

After dismissing the students from the Great Hall, Severus hurried out a side door, headed for a small back staircase which would let him out one hallway over from the Slytherin dormitories.

*In his own home, with forewarning of my arrival, Draco felt free to defy me. Let us see what happens here, in my territory, and when he is taken by surprise...*

He pushed aside the thin stone slab which veiled the stairs and stepped around the corner, bringing the jovial conversations of the Slytherins on their way to bed to an immediate halt. Several of them gaped at him, and Severus heard whispering in two or three places farther back in the crowd.

*Good to know my reputation still holds firm. Now to find—ah.*

“Malfoy,” he said, crooking a finger at the boy. “Come.”

“Tell you more later,” Draco said to the girls who’d been listening intently to his story, and came forward through the crowd. “Yes, sir?”

The tone was civil enough, so Severus let the hint of irony on the honorific slide. “Follow me,” he said without any other explanation. “The rest of you should get some sleep. No doubt you are eager to be fresh for your new term tomorrow.”

Turning, he started down the hall, hearing Draco’s footsteps behind him. *Not this left turn, but the next... if memory serves, there are unused guest rooms here...*

The room at the end of the hall had its door ajar. Severus pushed it farther open, lit his wand, and waved Draco inside. The boy’s lips twitched as he entered. Apparently, something about the room amused him.

*Let it be his downfall, then. Amusement is weakness when it comes to the mental arts.*

Severus shut the door and turned to face Draco. “I will have the truth from you about Miss Lovegood,” he said, noticing with some satisfaction the flash of fear which crossed Draco’s face at the mention of the name. “And I will have it now.”

Black eyes held gray in an unbreakable gaze.

---

*Dear Mum,*

*Don’t be too surprised if your special friend seems a bit stressed tonight. He tried to get the truth about Luna out of me yesterday. I fobbed him off with the abbreviated presentation of What I Did on My Holidays, and now he’s sure at least one of us is mad. You don’t have to tell me it wasn’t nice, I know that already, but it was very funny and what else was I supposed to do?*

*Breakfast is almost over so I’d better finish up. Everyone here sends their love. Hope to see you in Hogsmeade at the end of the month.*

*Draco*

*P.S. What are the odds of his interrogating me in the same room where we stayed that first night at Hogwarts?*

*P.P.S. Can you send me a couple of Audio Recording Spells? Luna’s had an idea and I think it sounds like fun.*

---

Severus stared dourly at the empty glass in his hand. Part of him longed for the oblivion alcohol would bring, but a larger part was all too aware that by some quirk of his metabolism, he was seldom too drunk to dream.

*As well, I waken more slowly when I have been drinking, meaning it would take longer to escape from a nightmare.*

*And nightmares I will have from those images, though they will be nightmares of confusion rather than those of fear...*

Instead of reaching for the bottle once more, he drew his wand and removed the memories he had encountered within Draco's mind, then dropped them into the Pensieve sitting on the desk and lowered his face into them. Perhaps, when he had looked them over, they would begin to make more sense.

*Or perhaps they will remain as nonsensical as they are.*

The first memory involved a small girl with a strong resemblance to Hermione Granger. She was of the age to be a first year, but no student Severus recognized, and she was singing a Muggle Christmas song he knew vaguely from snatches overheard on the radio.

*Something about wanting only the one she loves for Christmas, nothing else. Typical sticky-sweet sentimentality.*

Still, the scene seemed familiar to him, as though he had seen this, or something like it, long ago. Though it was lacking a person, someone who should have been beside him...

Severus looked askance at the empty space beside him. *Perhaps I should have checked the expiration date on that bottle. Any drink which makes me hallucinate about attending concerts with Sibyll Trelawney cannot be good for me.*

Shaking his head, he moved forward through the memories in order. There seemed to be a great many involving parties, and he paused over one in particular, wondering when or where Draco had caught a glimpse of Petunia Evans and the fat man who seemed likely to be her husband Vernon Dursley.

*Especially in such a good mood as this memory would have them. From what I remember of Petunia and what I can assume about any man mad enough to marry her, joviality was not high on their list of desirable character traits.*

Another long sequence was set in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, but the Great Hall such as Severus had never seen it. He hadn't even been sure it would be possible to make the place watertight, but apparently it was.

*A swimming party, with gillyweed provided.* He stifled a laugh as the mysterious girl who had sung earlier swam up behind Draco and pulled his swimming trunks partway down. Draco yelped

silently, spun in place, and stroked off after the girl, who was paddling away as fast as she could for her bubbly fit of the giggles. *Mischief optional.*

The scene blurred, and he was outside the castle, surrounded by witches and wizards in warm clothing. They were chanting together. “Five! Four! Three! Two! One!”

A huge, four-legged, multicolored shape plummeted from the Astronomy Tower.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!” the crowd screamed, and spells shot from every direction at the bizarre object, which now dangled halfway down the Tower from a cord.

“What is it?” Draco, a few feet from Severus, bellowed at a girl his own age standing beside him.

“It’s called a piñata!” she shouted back. “If we can break it open—yes, there it goes now!” The creature, which Severus now recognized as a goat, exploded to massive cheers from the crowd, and a shower of tiny objects rained from it. “Come on, it’s full of sweets and we have to hurry if we want to get any!”

Severus froze the memory in place and looked sharply at the girl. He knew that voice, though usually he only heard it so excited over a new and difficult potion or an important Quidditch match.

*And she is the last person in the world with whom Draco Malfoy should be willing to talk so easily. Not to mention how she likely feels about him, with their recent history.*

Yet it was unmistakably Hermione Granger with her hand on Draco’s arm, tugging him towards the shower of sweets falling from the piñata.

*At the risk of betraying my origins—curiouser and curiouser.*

He let the memories play on, weaving in and out of casual parties and formal balls, noting in passing that there seemed to be two Luna Lovegoods in attendance at most of them.

*Perhaps her mind has finally fractured under the stress of assault, and this is Draco’s way of seeing that.*

A bit of a Christmas pantomime made him chuckle, as Draco, wearing a long coat and a curly black wig, shook his very realistic-looking hook skyward at the same girl from before, flying lazy circles above him. She was dressed now in puckish green, and several parts of the costume looked suspiciously stiff.

*Likely padded pockets holding miniature broomsticks.*

“Next time I’ll get you, Peter Pan!” Draco bellowed as the girl zoomed away over the heads of the audience, laughing.

*I wonder, is this the person he secretly wishes he could be? Uninhibited, playful, friendly with*

*those he has always made his enemies?*

But whatever Draco Malfoy wished he could be, he was something completely different, Severus reminded himself firmly.

*And his salvation, or lack thereof, is out of my hands.*

He sent the memories shooting forward past him until he reached the moment which had thrown him out of Draco's mind entirely and made him order the boy back to his dormitory before Draco could see how much the memory had shaken him.

*Though since he is becoming frighteningly observant, likely he noticed in any case.*

The memory was fogged around the edges, as though the person from whose mind it came had been overtired or under great stress at the moment. The important points, though, were quite clear.

The room was grand and spacious, of a size with those on the main floor of Malfoy Manor. A shimmering Christmas tree dominated one side of it. Sofas and chairs were drawn up around the tree, as though it would soon be the central focus of a sizable gathering. And seated on one of the sofas, robed in white and draped in blue, cradling an infant in her arms and smiling down with infinite tenderness...

Severus pulled himself free of the memory. "There will be a reckoning," he promised himself in a low tone. "When he dares snoop even within my dreams... when he dares taunt me with *her*, with her face in that setting... yes. There will be a reckoning for him."

But as he restored the memories to his mind, the last one slipped to the fore again. Without conscious intent, Severus closed his eyes and spent a few eternal moments admiring his Cecilia in a pose which would have done justice to any painter of the manger scene who had ever lived.

He did not see the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, on the wall behind him, slip out of the frame and disappear.

---

Draco Spellotaped shut the hand-size box he'd liberated from Zabini's wardrobe. Judging by the mostly-empty state of the bottle of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes Love Potion Number Ten ("Better than a serenade!"), Zabini wasn't about to try returning it, and would therefore have no need of the box.

*Though I wish I knew what he's doing with the potion...*

*Ah well. Not my business.*

What was his business, at the moment, was getting the precious object currently reposing within this bright orange box safely to the people who could best use it. And unless he was greatly mistaken, the box itself would direct the owl carrying it.

*Handy, when you're trying to keep up with business at the same time you're on the run.*

He shoved the box into his schoolbag, picked up the letter to his mother which was his cover story, and left the dorm for the Owlery.

*I think that little act with the Galleon did what I wanted it to, at least on Neville's side. He's been watching me more closely lately, and he doesn't look as hostile as he used to. Ginny... well, she's a Weasley, and the hair is truth in advertising. When she hates, she hates. But this might help change her mind, as long as her brothers do what I hope they will with it.*

One owl got the letter, another the package, and they winged off in their different directions. Draco watched them go, until he became aware of a tugging at his robes. He looked down. "Evening, Dobby."

"Draco Malfoy is wanted in the Headmaster's office," said the clothed house-elf with dignity. "Immediately."

Draco sighed. "What's Snape want with me now?"

"It is not Professor Snape who wants to see Draco Malfoy," Dobby said, shaking his head. "Take Dobby's hand, please."

Draco reached down and closed his fingers around the house-elf's.

Darkness squeezed its fist around him. He gasped, or would have if there had been any air.

*This is Apparition—but you can't do that at Hogwarts—*

The Head's office exploded into being around them. Draco stumbled but caught himself on the back of one of the guest chairs. "So if it's not Snape who wants to see me, who is it?" he asked.

"It is I," said a voice from the wall, and Professor Dumbledore walked into view in the largest picture frame. "Please, Draco, sit down. I believe we have much to discuss."

## Be Careful 64: Who You Listen To

“Much to discuss?” Draco repeated. “What do we have to—”

Several pieces of memory chose this moment to surface. Mum sitting at the head of the table at Fidelus Manor, explaining how she had met Draco’s Headmaster in her dreams, with the help of “an Albus Dumbledore from a world far away from mine.” His quiet conversation with her over the signed adoption contract, when she had revealed that she had known his name for a year before their first meeting, though only in the context of a boy whose soul was “not yet so damaged” as to make him a murderer. The night he had discovered the same thing about himself, and the words, at the time incomprehensible, Dumbledore had spoken to him.

*“It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now...”*

The memories collided and formed a certainty within Draco’s mind.

“You did this!”

“Did what?” Dumbledore asked mildly.

Draco glared at the portrait. “Don’t play stupid!”

“I assure you, I am not playing...” Dumbledore stopped, frowning. “Dear me. I don’t think that’s quite what I meant to say.”

A laugh escaped Draco before he could help it, taking much of his indignation with it. “I don’t think it is either,” he said. “What was?”

“I meant to ask you to elaborate on what has been happening to you for the past few months.” Dumbledore seated himself in the chair within his frame and gestured for Draco to do the same in one of the chairs beside him. “Without knowing what you have been through, I cannot know what is my doing and what is not. I know you have changed—Severus comments on it frequently, most often with a fair degree of bafflement—but not how or why. So...” One long-fingered hand opened politely. “The more you are willing to tell me, the more I can likely explain.”

“The whole story takes a while,” Draco warned, looking over his shoulder at the door. “And I don’t think Snape would be too happy to find me here.”

“Your Headmaster,” said Dumbledore in a tone of mild reproof, “has gone out for the night and does not plan to return until tomorrow morning. I doubt we will be disturbed.”

*Well, that’s put me in my place, hasn’t it now. Why should I tell you anything, you meddling old man? You’re not even alive anymore—this is just a shadow of you, stuck on the wall in canvas and paint. What do you know?*

The mental voice, sullen and petulant, brought with it a flood of memories, memories of a spoiled brat with Draco’s name and face. Once, he would have said that out loud, and meant every word of it. He would have been truly angry that anyone had dared meddle in his life.

He had been, once.

*I don’t need your protection! I’ve got all the assistance I need, thanks!* The words surfaced as from the distant past, though he had said them—could it really be just over a year ago? It seemed like a lifetime.

*Maybe it was. Maybe Abby’s right, and that stupid little ponce of a pureblood died on the Astronomy Tower. Or—no. I think I understand now.*

“You wanted to help me,” he said, looking up at Dumbledore’s portrait. The old Headmaster might have been a Muggle painting for all he’d moved while Draco was thinking. “Even when I was standing there with my wand pointed at you, trying to get up the nerve to kill you, you were thinking about how you could help me.”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, as matter-of-factly as though he’d been asked if asphodel and wormwood made the Draught of Living Death.

“So you did—I don’t know what you did. It has to have been wandless, and it didn’t take effect right away...” Draco rubbed at his left elbow, massaging an ache out of his arm. “Or did you set it so that it would only work when I wanted it, when I wanted it more than anything? That would fit you, with all your talk about choices. Did you?”

Dumbledore inclined his head, smiling.

“And whatever it was, you’d done it before. With Snape—*Professor* Snape,” Draco corrected himself before Dumbledore could. Calling up his memory of his mum’s story about Snape, he laid it over his own experience. “Maybe it was wanded then, so you had it under better control. Or you had enough time to make it work just the way you wanted it to. You’d know more than I would.”

“On the contrary.” Dumbledore’s smile broadened. “You know a great deal. Far more than I had expected. Would you like to continue, or shall I?”

“Go on if you’d like,” Draco said, leaning back in his chair. Then he remembered who he was talking to, and added a belated, “Sir.”

“As you wish, Draco, as you wish.” Dumbledore tapped his fingertips together. “As you have

guessed, or more likely been told, I did indeed cast on Severus Snape a version of the magic I used on you. As you were speculating, though, that spell was under far better control than the one I performed on the Astronomy Tower. My body's weakness meant that my magic was fluctuating wildly, and as you also noted, I was without my wand, so that I was forced to use more magic than I normally would, to ensure that the spell would take hold."

"What was it meant to do, sir? I mean, if it had been done just right?"

"Severus' experience is fairly typical," said Dumbledore. "Though I doubt if that is the right word for such a new piece of magic. You see, I developed this spell myself, in an attempt to save the life and sanity of a young man worth the effort. He has proven me right over the intervening years, though I doubt some of his students would agree."

Draco stifled a snort of laughter. "So it was meant to send someone pleasant dreams," he said. "Give them a place, and a person, that would never go bad on them. Somewhere to go to ground when everything else goes pear-shaped."

"Precisely."

Keeping his face carefully straight, Draco squeezed the ferecarne arm in the pattern which released the bonding spell. The prosthetic came loose with a slight sucking noise, and he pulled it out of the sleeve of his robes and laid it across his knees.

"Some dreams are more real than others," he said.

The look of utter astonishment on Dumbledore's face almost made up for losing the arm in the first place, Draco thought.

Almost.

*Harry's and Ron's reactions ought to make up the difference, though.*

"You travel bodily, then?" Dumbledore said at last. "Between this world and another one?"

"Every night." Draco reattached his arm, threading it carefully up the sleeve so as not to snag on the loose thread near the wrist. "And with a dream-trance spell I learned for emergencies. But that comes later in the story..."

It had been a very good thing that he'd been able to practice telling this story on Luna, Draco reflected later. Luna was an interested but unquestioning audience. Dumbledore, on the other hand, had a question at every turn, and though he visibly stopped himself from asking three-quarters of them, the quarter which got out added considerably to the story's length.

*And I thought he'd never stop laughing when I told him who teaches advanced Defense...*

"So the lady I asked to heal Severus' heart, all those years ago, is both real and reachable," Dumbledore said at last. "And your chosen mother. Do you plan to make her decide between

you?”

Draco shook his head. He had talked this one over with Luna at length, during the seven days they'd spent at Malfoy Manor to make up for the uninterrupted recovery week at Fidelus Manor, and was as satisfied with the answer as he thought he was likely to get. “She loves us different ways, sir,” he said. “And I've always liked him, no matter what I acted like last year. I think we could get along fine, just as long as no one expects me to call him ‘Dad.’”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I expect he would hex you quite severely if you tried. That seems satisfactory, then. Now, if you would, tell me more about your plan regarding this recording you were owling out when Dobby found you...”

That plan segued into another, and that one into a third, and before Draco knew it he was telling the portrait everything he and his friends had thought about doing or trying. Dumbledore listened carefully, pointed out unexpected problems with a few of the ideas, made suggestions of his own about others, and made one request Draco thought was a bit odd.

“Walk by the lake in the evenings?” he repeated. “It's a bit cold for that, isn't it?”

“It is, but I want you to be in the habit of it.” Dumbledore's eyes twinkled for an instant, but the rest of his face remained serious. “And at this time, I cannot tell you why. I will, however, ask you to bring Miss Lovegood here at some point. It does not have to be soon,” he said as Draco bristled in automatic defense, “and it should certainly be secret, but I fear I must speak with her. She is likely the only person who can perform one small but vital task.”

“How small?” Draco said suspiciously.

“It will take only ten minutes,” Dumbledore reassured him. “And she will never leave your sight.”

Draco still had his doubts, but he let it pass. Luna could take care of herself.

They talked for a little while longer, but Draco was starting to have trouble suppressing his yawns, and Dobby appeared in response to Dumbledore's call with a promptness that made Draco suspect his former house-elf had been waiting nearby.

“Dobby can take you to your dormitory directly,” Dumbledore said. “I would not want you to get into trouble for being in the hallway after curfew when the fault was mine.”

“Thank you, sir,” Draco said, standing up. “For... well, for everything.”

*Because if you hadn't done what you did, I wouldn't even be able to say that.*

“It is most truly my pleasure,” said Dumbledore. “Good night, Draco.”

“Good night, sir.”

xXxXx

In the cellar of the tiny house where Remus Lupin and his wife were currently living, Fred and George Weasley and Lee Jordan looked at one another. A sphere of glass lay in the center of the table around which they sat, the silver mist within it roiling slightly.

“Think it’s for real?” Fred said finally.

“Sounds real to me,” said George. “But I never knew her that well.”

“I suppose we could run it past her dad,” Lee said. “But they’re watching your house even harder since he disappeared. We might get caught.”

Fred nodded. “Why not just play it?” he suggested. “If it’s really her, Ginny’s bound to send us an owl about it.”

“And then we’ll know,” said George. “I like it.”

Lee brought his hands together. “Let’s do it.”

The three got to their feet and started gathering their equipment together, Fred slipping the glass ball with careful solemnity into his pocket.

“Clever of whoever sent it to us, using a return box,” George commented as they packed. “Wonder if we could backtrail it through that?”

“Nah,” said Fred. “If they’re that clever already, they’ll have used someone else’s box.”

“True. Pity.”

xXxXx

Upstairs, Tonks lay curled up in the big armchair in the living room. One of her hands was wrapped around a small sheaf of papers, while the other lay protectively over her belly.

She knew the voice the boys were talking about, in the somewhat abstract way one knew the voices of the friends of one’s friends. Part of her wondered if she should have shown them the papers, to give them more proof that the voice was really who it said it was. Most of her, though, was for keeping the papers firmly to herself.

*At least until I’m sure if they’re for real.*

She unrolled them one more time, just to see that title again, just to let herself feel that rush of disbelieving hope. Where they had come from, who had written them, she had no idea, no more than she knew if the spells and potions listed were genuine or quackery, but just their existence let her believe in a world where her greatest desire could be gratified.

*A world where Remus will never be so afraid of himself that he’ll run away from me, ever again.*

She ran a finger along the words in large print at the top of the first page, thrilling to their meaning.

## *On the Ethical and Permanent Controlling of the Lycanthropic Transformation*

xXxXx

In the Gryffindor common room, an almost unheard-of condition prevailed.

Silence.

*Potterwatch* was broadcasting. And when *Potterwatch* broadcast, Gryffindors listened.

“And now for our newest segment,” said “River,” whose voice always made Ginny feel happy and sad at the same time, thinking of Quidditch games and then, inevitably, of Harry. “It was sent to us by a young lady who wishes to be called only ‘Radiance’—”

“I beg your pardon,” “Rapier” broke in, or perhaps it was “Rodent.” Ginny never could tell them apart just by voice. “That’s ‘the lovely Radiance’ to you.”

“I’m so sorry, it is indeed. Here, then, from the lovely Radiance, is our newest segment, ‘Tips for Evil Overlords’!”

A moment of static-like noise, which sufficed for Ginny and Neville to exchange a blank look, the same sort which was being traded all over the room. A click, and then—

“Hello, and welcome to ‘Tips for Evil Overlords,’” said a silvery voice Ginny knew very well indeed. “I am the lovely Radiance, and I’ll be your host today. The following are five things every Evil Overlord should know:

“Giving your followers distinctive tattoos or brands, especially in an obvious area of the body, allows them to be easily spotted.

“Making your followers wear full face masks means that they can’t betray each other, but also means they can be infiltrated.

“Treating any significant section of the populace like dirt means they will eventually rise up and overwhelm you. Try a little kindness.

“If you’re going to hide the object which is your one weakness in a secret cave, make sure to kill everyone who can find the cave yourself.

“And finally, never attempt to consume any energy field larger than your head.”

The Gryffindors stared at one another. Then a third year girl began to giggle. A boy her own age snickered, and another coughed a few times. Within a few seconds the whole House was laughing, the tensions they hadn’t been able to acknowledge bleeding off with the sound.

A soft “Ahem” from the wireless a moment or two later quieted the noise. “I would just like to take this opportunity to tell my friends that I truly am all right,” Luna’s voice went on. “And that they can send messages worth their weight in gold without being afraid. No one is watching who would hurt any of them.” A quiet laugh. “I would tell you who to trust, but I doubt you’d believe me. So I’ll just say good night to all of you, and good night, Harry, wherever you are.”

Lee’s parting words and the password for the next broadcast were nearly drowned out by the excited shouting of DA members. Ginny sank into a chair, shaking with relief she’d been afraid to feel.

“She probably is really safe,” said Neville, leaning over the chair’s arm to speak quietly. “If she can make fun of You-Know-Who like that, she can’t be with Death Eaters.”

“I know.” Ginny got her breathing under control. “I know. Thank you.”

*And thank you, Luna, wherever you are. You’ve told me it’s still worth it to fight.*

“So.” Taking one last deep breath and letting it out, Ginny looked up at Neville with a grin. “Are we breaking into Snape’s office sometime this month or what?”

## **Be Careful**

### **65: Who You Turn Your Back On**

The first Hogsmeade day of the new term dawned clear and cold, sending students digging through their trunks for extra socks and charming their scarves to heat the air around their faces. Ginny watched the rest of Gryffindor Tower getting ready to go and hoped her expression looked wistful. In truth, she was scared out of her socks. What she was going to attempt today was a task sufficient to daunt even the bravest of Gryffindors.

*Think it through, Ginny, her mother's voice admonished in the back of her mind. Make sure every step makes sense.*

Ginny thought as directed, tapping at different places on the table in front of her as though she were explaining a Quidditch play to someone who'd never seen it done. For the sake of the war, Harry needed the sword of Gryffindor. For the sake of her own sanity, Ginny needed to show the world she would not be cowed. For the sake of her nerve endings, she would rather it was Snape she provoked.

*Even if it was Malfoy who suggested it.*

Snape had taken the sword away from his office and hidden it somewhere. Ginny didn't know where and had no idea how to start finding out. But neither had anyone for hundreds of years, and that hadn't stopped Harry using the sword to kill the basilisk.

*And I'd say he needs it as much now as he did then.*

So her plan was set. She knew what she was going to steal, who she would send it to, and what she would ask them to do with it.

*I don't know how much trouble I'll get in, but I can guess.*

*Lots and lots and lots.*

*But I'm a Weasley and a Gryffindor. What else did you expect?*

She walked down to the entrance hall with Neville, where they shook hands. "Have a good day," she said.

"You too." *Good luck*, he mouthed silently, giving her hand an extra squeeze before letting go.

“Thanks,” Ginny said to both comments, and stood back as Filch checked over the lines of students before opening the huge doors to let them go out into the watery winter sunshine.

Several faces from the usual Slytherin crowd were missing, Ginny noticed as most of the school walked past her. Malfoy and his goons seemed to have decided on a day indoors, as well as Zabini, though Theodore Nott had Daphne Greengrass on his arm and was laughing uproariously at something she’d just told him. A girl a year or two younger than Ginny with a strong resemblance to Daphne gave them a disgusted look before stalking out the door.

*Yeah, I think I’d be pretty disgusted too if my sister had decided the best bet in her year was some rabbit-faced Junior Death Eater.*

The thought made her smile, but close on its heels were thoughts of dating in general, thoughts about love, and that led her inexorably to the one place she didn’t want to be.

*Ye gods, Harry, I miss you. Where are you today? Are you in one of your moods, the sort not even Hermione can pull you out of like I can? Ron said you were all right, but was he just trying to make us feel better? What does “close call Christmas Eve” mean?*

And over and over, the most irrational and least eradicable question in her life beat against the walls of her brain.

*Why not me? Why couldn’t you take me? Why could you take Ron and Hermione with you, but not me? Am I not worth enough? Do I not matter to you?*

If she thought about it, Ginny knew the answer to that. She mattered to Harry so much that he wanted her to be safe, not taking the risks he took. Besides, she was still underage, where Ron and Hermione had both turned seventeen long since. She’d be under the Trace until August, which would render her unable to do magic without being found and therefore a liability rather than an asset.

*But I’m not safe here. Not the way we all thought I would be. And it isn’t magic you need me for. It’s taking your blinders off. You get so fixated on whatever you’re after that you forget to look around you, you forget other people exist, you forget we can help you. I can break through that for you. I can remind you about the rest of us.*

*Or I could, if I were there.*

She shook herself, breaking her melancholy mood. She might not be able to be with Harry in person, but she was with him in spirit, and about to do something that would help him.

*I hope.*

After one more look around the entrance hall—it might be the last time for a while she’d see it by daylight—Ginny started up the stairs. The current password to Snape’s office, she’d learned yesterday from another mysterious note in her own writing, was “Derwent”. What was more,

Snape himself was out in Hogsmeade today, as were the Carrows. She'd never have a better opportunity.

"Hello there, Weasley girl," said a voice from a cross-corridor as she passed it.

Ginny drew her wand before turning to answer. "Hello, Zabini. Not going to Hogsmeade?"

"No, I have a project I need to finish." The Slytherin seventh-year smiled coldly down at her. "And you're it. Now, boys."

Ginny barely had time to realize he'd shifted his gaze to look over her shoulder when strong arms wrapped her in a bear hug and a smelly bag descended over her head. She screamed, but heard the sound die away as it passed through the cloth. Her wand was wrenched from her hand, her feet left the ground, and the last thing she heard was a satisfied chuckle, underlying the word "*Stupefy!*"

---

"Oh dear God that's so wrong," Ron muttered. "That is so utterly wrong."

"Yes, we've established that it's wrong," said Hermione testily. "Can we move on now?"

"Ah!" Ron covered his eyes with his hands. "Do you think they can hear you?"

"I hope not," said Harry. "Come on, they're busy snogging, we'll never get a better chance. On three... one, two—"

"*Stupefy,*" said Ron and Hermione together. The Slytherin pair in front of them froze in unison, then toppled over together, one's tongue coming out of the other's mouth as they fell.

"That's sick," Ron said, ducking out from under the Invisibility Cloak. "That is really sick."

"Look on the bright side," Harry pointed out, holding up the Cloak to let Hermione emerge, then dropping it back over himself. "At least no one will be surprised to see you two together."

*Least of all me.*

Harry was glad Ron had finally realized that Hermione was not only a girl but a girl worth kissing, and that Hermione returned the sentiment so wholeheartedly. It had made Ron's return to them far less strained than it could have been. As if in exchange, though, it had altered the balance of relations within their tiny world, so much so that Harry sometimes felt like an outsider on his own quest.

*I wish I could convince them that what they have now is too valuable to risk. That they should go home, keep fighting from undercover, and let me do this alone. Maybe, if they decide to get a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks, I can find Neville and leave him a note for them, and get back to the tent and away before they know I'm gone. Have to get Ron's Deluminator, though, or he'll just use it to find his way back like he did before...*

“I think we’re ready,” said Hermione, breaking into Harry’s thoughts. She had two bundles of clothes in her arms, and Ron was just dragging their Slytherin yearmate, clothed in only his underwear, into the woods, the shimmer of a warming spell hovering around him. Harry could see his girlfriend’s bare feet poking out of the snow-covered undergrowth already. “Shall we go get changed, then?”

In the tent, which they’d erected and protected a few hundred yards from the village, Ron shucked out of most of his clothes, striking a few poses to make Hermione blush, and swallowed his pale tan Polyjuice. Hermione conjured a folding screen behind which she disappeared and returned a few moments later with a different face, fastening her green-lined winter cloak as Ron swung his around him.

“Ready?” Harry said, picking up the Invisibility Cloak.

“No,” said Ron, grimacing at the sound of his thin voice. “Let’s go anyway.”

“After you,” said Hermione, holding open the tent flap.

“No, after you.” Ron bowed to her.

“Everybody, after me,” said Harry, striding out the open flap.

It would have been far more effective had he not tripped on the tent’s threshold and fallen flat on his face.

*Some days you just can’t win for losing.*

---

Neville checked his watch as he came out of Honeydukes. *I hope Ginny’s doing all right. She ought to be out of Snape’s office by now and headed up to the Owlery.*

“Thanks for letting me have that box, Padma,” he said, remembering. “I used mine for something else, because I didn’t think they’d all break down like that.”

“It’s not a problem,” said the slender Ravenclaw, pulling her cloak tighter around her. “Someone should really tell Fred and George their spell-checking quills stop working after a few months.”

Parvati shook her head. “They probably know,” she said. “It’s the kind of thing they’d think was funny.”

“Or good business,” added Seamus. “Keeps people coming back, buying repairs or new ones.”

“And it is funny,” said Hannah Abbott, smiling shyly at Neville. “I’ve never seen Professor McGonagall laugh so hard as she did when she read that Transfiguration essay of yours aloud.”

Neville smiled back, conscious of an odd feeling in his midsection, rather like the effect of having one’s ribs turn into several dozen butterflies.

*And I should know.*

He was just about to try to make the feeling go away or get stronger, and for the life of him he wasn't sure which, when—

“Hell-o, Longbottom,” said a boy's whining voice from behind him, as a hand dropped onto his shoulder.

“Fancy meeting you here!” added a girl's, with a giggle that smacked of hair-tossing.

Neville turned slowly. “Nott,” he said, stepping away from the Slytherin's hand. “Greengrass.”

“Oh, you know our names,” Daphne said, clasping her hands under her chin. “Isn't that sweet.”

“I'll make it simple, Longbottom,” said Nott, drawing his wand. “You're coming with us to see the boss. Got that?”

“What if I say no?” Neville asked, hearing his friends behind him start to reach for their own wands.

“Then I'll do what I did in first year,” said Daphne, staring at him. “And this time, it won't win you the House Cup.”

Neville stared for an instant, then held up his right hand, stopping Seamus in the middle of casting his first spell. “I'll fight you,” he said to the Slytherins, making a fist where they could see it with his left.

Daphne sighed. “Neville, I'm really, really sorry about this,” she said, raising her wand.

“You don't have to do that,” Neville said hastily. “I'll come.”

“No!” Hannah cried, running forward. “Don't hurt him! Take me!”

“We're not going to hurt him,” said Nott in a bored tone. “Not unless he's stupid. The boss just wants to see him, talk to him for a little while. You'll get him back all in one piece.”

“House honor on it,” Daphne added.

“From you, I trust that,” said Neville, and saw a familiar smile break across Daphne's face.

He turned to face the DA. “I'll be all right,” he told them. “I should be back in about an hour. Meet me at the Hog's Head?”

Nodding heads answered him, though Hannah still looked frightened. Neville held out his hand, and felt another little rush of excitement through his stomach when she took it. “I promise I'll be all right,” he said. “House honor on it.”

“From you, I trust that,” Hannah whispered. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

“See you.” Neville squeezed her hand and let it go, then turned to face the Slytherins. “Take me to your leader,” he said.

*Someday I’m going to have to ask her why that’s funny.*

*Probably a Muggle thing.*

---

Ginny awakened all at once in darkness. Her head hurt, her mouth tasted sour, and her wrists were tied together behind her.

“I’m going to kill you, Blaise Zabini,” she said aloud.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said a voice nearby, and the bag over her head was whisked off, allowing her to see her surroundings.

It was a small, low-ceilinged room of stone, windowless and with only one door. She lay on a moldering twin bed, the only furnishing in the room besides the tiny, steaming cauldron over which Zabini was bending. Crabbe stood by the door, arms folded, and Goyle—Ginny craned her neck to see—was behind her, crumpling the bag in his big hands. Her wand stuck out of his right-hand pocket.

“No, you won’t kill me,” Zabini repeated, sniffing warily at the steam from the cauldron, then returning to stirring it. “Not after you have a sip of what’s in here.”

“What makes you think I’ll drink anything you give me?” Ginny shot back, getting her legs over the edge of the bed and sitting up stiffly.

“You won’t have a choice, my dear little Gryffindor. You’ll be under the Imperius.” Zabini smirked at her through the steam. “But that’s the last time I’ll ever need to use it on you. Once you’ve tasted what I have here, you’ll be only too happy to do whatever I say. Forever.” He scooped up a bit on the end of his stirring stick and let it splash back into the cauldron. “How delightful that your own brothers sold the love potion that gave me the base for this charming little concoction...”

## Be Careful

### 66: Who You Say You Love

Terror set Ginny's thoughts racing, even as she fought down the visible signs of fear. "So you've made me something special to drink," she said, putting on a lofty society tone such as the older Slytherin girls sometimes used. "How nice of you. I hope it has a good taste."

"Oh, I'm told it tastes quite nice indeed." Zabini balanced the stirring stick on the edge of the cauldron. "You'll have to tell me, after you've drunk it."

"But I'd really rather not be the very first one to try it." Ginny pulled her legs onto the bed and scooted back across it, bringing herself to within easy reach of Goyle. "Couldn't you be persuaded to try it first yourself?" She arched her back, making Crabbe stare. "I wouldn't think it'll affect you too much. You're already in love with yourself, after all."

Zabini laughed raucously. "Me? Try this? Surely you're joking."

*Of course I'm joking, and don't call me Shirley.* Ginny lifted her bound hands cautiously until she felt smooth wood against her fingers. *But do keep talking, keep their attention on you...*

"Still, I must admit I find your sense of humor one of your more attractive points." Zabini tapped a finger against the rim of the cauldron. "I've been brewing this for four months, Weasley girl—or no, I should call you by your given name now, shouldn't I, if we're to be such good friends?" He frowned. "I assume it's not merely 'Ginny?' I may have to choose a new one for you if it is."

Ginny administered a mental thwack to the portion of her brain which was insisting she should claim her real name was Shirley and looked demure, not an easy task while her hands were working in frantic slow motion behind her back. "Ginevra," she said. "My full name is Ginevra."

"Ginevra." Zabini turned the word over in his mouth, tasting it. "How exotic for such a homegrown creature as yourself."

"If I'm so homegrown, why are you interested in me?" Ginny challenged. Her palms were sweating, making her task doubly hard. *Harry. Think of Harry. Unless you can get out of this, you're never going to see him again.* "Why not go after someone more fitting?"

Zabini shook his head in wonder. "You have to ask? Ginevra, Ginevra, all my life girls have come at my call. It's my mother's greatest gift to me, or her greatest curse. Any girl I've ever wanted,

I've been able to have. Except you. You said no."

*And this makes me a candidate why?* Ginny breathed a silent sigh of relief as her objective slipped smoothly up her sleeve. Goyle hadn't noticed a thing. *Thank you, Fred, George, for those pocket-picking lessons when I was seven—I swear I'll ask Mum to go easier on you for the mail-order business next time I'm home.*

"No," Zabini repeated. "It wasn't a word I was used to. So I set out to find a way to change it into a word I understood better." His mocking grin appeared again. "Of course, when you add in that I can take a little revenge on Harry Potter for his actions against the Dark Lord, and possibly even bring him back here to find out why you've abandoned him, today becomes more satisfying than it already was. If such a thing is possible. So, if we are quite finished with our little chitchat, may I suggest we proceed to the main event of the day?" He tapped the cauldron with the stirring stick. "Changing your 'no' to a 'yes'?"

---

"Neville and Hannah, sitting in a—ow!"

"You're forgetting who you are," hissed 'Daphne Greengrass,' glowering at 'Theodore Nott.'  
"Stop it!"

'Nott' rubbed his arm and glared at 'Daphne.' "You're forgetting Rule Ninety-Eight," he said. "If you keep being mean to me, we're going to get killed."

"You-Know-Who hasn't read that stupid list!"

"How do you know?"

Neville, walking a step or two in front of the pair, wasn't bothering to stop himself smiling. They'd left the village behind and were walking across an open field with no one in sight, which meant it probably wasn't necessary for his disguised friends to keep acting like the people whose identities they'd temporarily stolen.

*But I'm still glad Hermione stopped Ron singing that song. I don't like Hannah... well, I mean, I like her, but I don't like like her... I don't think...*

A hand landed on his shoulder, startling him out of his thoughts. "Have a seat," said the voice his gut said was Nott's, but his mind knew was Ron's. "The boss will be along in a minute."

Neville sat down on a fold of his cloak, which was waterproof, and watched as Ron bent down and obtained a handful of snow. Hermione, kneeling a few feet away, seemed not to have noticed, but Neville saw her hands moving in scooping motions in front of her, and he doubted she was sculpting miniature snowmen.

*Well, that accounts for what they're doing out in this field alone, but if anyone sees me just sitting here, they're going to start wondering why...*

A veil of silvery fabric dropped between him and the rest of the world. He reached out to touch it; it felt like water made into cloth. Through it, he saw Ron hurl his first snowball, saw Hermione dodge and throw one back that missed by several feet, heard his friends both laughing, not even the borrowed voices of the Slytherins able to disguise the fun they were having—

Someone cleared his throat. Neville jerked his head back around and grinned.

“I knew you’d come back,” he said, squeezing Harry’s outstretched hand. “I knew it.”

“Glad to hear it.” Harry returned the grin for a moment, but it was forced. “You look terrible. Has it been that bad?”

Neville shrugged. “We get by. Is this it? Is it time?” *Please, say yes, he prayed silently. For Ginny’s sake, if not for mine. She’d kill me if I told you how they’re going after her, but they are, and the only way it’s going to stop is if we throw the Carrows out or she gets away...*

Harry shook his head. “Sorry. We’re making progress, we’re farther along than I ever thought we would be, but there’s still one thing we don’t have. The reason we’re here is that Luna sent us.”

“Luna?” Neville sat up a little straighter. “You’ve heard from her?”

“Indirectly. She left a package in one of the places we’ve been searching, and if I ever figure out how she knew where we’d be, I’ll tell you. In any case, part of the package was a letter that suggested we come to one of the Hogsmeade weekends, so here we are. And I’m supposed to give you this.” Harry rummaged in his pocket for a moment and pulled out a large, dirty square of parchment. “It was my dad’s, so don’t mess it up.”

“I won’t.” Neville received it reverently. “This is that magical map, isn’t it? The one that shows where people are in the castle?”

“This is it.” Harry held out his hand. “Can I borrow your wand? Mine isn’t working right now.”

Neville drew his wand and handed it over. Harry waved it a few times experimentally, then touched it to the center of the parchment. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good. It knows the identity of the person who’s activating it,” he added as the lines began to form, “and it’ll show you the people you’ve associated with the most, plus random other ones it thinks you might be interested in.”

“Smart.” Neville peered down at the Marauder’s Map, watching the different levels of Hogwarts grow on its surface. “How do I send it blank again?”

“Another tap and ‘mischief managed.’ Make sure to do that every time and no one else will be able to use it, because it won’t respond to anything but the correct passwords.” Harry snickered. “It insulted Snape one time when he tried to force it to work. Called him an idiot and told him to wash his hair.”

Neville laughed. For this one moment, everything at Hogwarts was the way it should be again.

Then he looked back down at the Map, which was currently showing the dungeons.

His mind froze. From the slurry of brain and ice emerged two very simple thoughts.

*This is not good.*

*Not good at all.*

---

“But I think you’re being terribly unfair,” said Ginny, letting a hint of a pout show on her face.

“Unfair? How?”

“You ought to let your friends have some of that lovely potion before you give any to me!” Ginny declared. “It smells so good, it should taste even better, and it would make them so very happy, but no, you’re being rude and keeping it all for me, and that isn’t fair at all!”

“What are you talking about?” Zabini asked suspiciously. Behind him, Crabbe was frowning deeply as he tried to understand the long and complicated words.

*I don’t believe I’m about to say this.* “Your friends!” Ginny gushed. “Your comrades in arms, so strong and so loyal!” A simpering smile, first up towards Goyle, then outward towards Crabbe. “I think they deserve a reward for helping you bring us together, and what would be better than giving them the greatest joy in the world by letting them sample your wonderful potion?” Another pout, and this time she managed to summon up a tear to go with it. All it took was imagining her fate if her desperation ploy didn’t work. “But no, you won’t let them have even the teeniest drop, when that’s all it would take to give them what they deserve for all their hard work—”

Crabbe bellowed like a bull and made a rush for the cauldron. Zabini whipped out his wand and nailed the larger Slytherin with an Impediment Jinx. Unfortunately, this didn’t stop Goyle, who had lumbered out from behind the bed and was now on his knees beside the cauldron. His hand went in—he yelped and shoved his fingers into his mouth—

And his expression changed, from one of grim determination to absolute devotion. Zabini spun an instant too late; Goyle had already clambered to his feet, and now he flung his arms around the black boy, pinning Zabini’s wand arm by his side. Zabini’s eyes bugged out as Goyle squeezed, a look of doglike bliss on his face.

Ginny enjoyed the spectacle for precisely half a second before getting down to business. Her right hand went up her left sleeve, grasped the end of the item she’d stowed there, and pointed it at the ropes. “*Diffindo*,” she whispered, cutting them cleanly.

Crabbe, meanwhile, had recovered from the Impediment Jinx, and was at the cauldron, scooping a handful of boiling potion directly into his mouth. His cry of pain modulated, as he looked at Zabini, into a tender croon, and he leapt up and opened his arms wide, sending the cauldron flying and spilling the remainder of the potion across the floor. “I love you!” he shouted.

Pulling ends of rope free from her wrists, Ginny stifled a laugh at the mix of terror and disgust Zabini was now evincing. *Hoist by your own petard, there, snake-boy.*

Goyle let go of Zabini, who staggered back, wheezing, and whirled to face Crabbe. “I loved him first!” he yelled, stamping his foot like a five-year-old.

“Well, I love him better, so there!”

“Do not!”

“Do so!”

With inarticulate shrieks of rage, the two charged at one another.

*I do believe that's my exit cue.* Ginny shot a quick Disarmer at Zabini, who was now leaning against the far wall trying to catch his breath, and saluted him with her wand as she caught his in her off hand. “Have fun with your new boyfriends,” she said over the sound of the fighting Crabbe and Goyle. “Ta-ta.”

“Stop her!” Zabini found the breath to shout as Ginny blasted the door off its hinges. “I’ll love whichever of you can catch her, I swear I will!”

*I'm almost tempted to let them catch me, just so I can see that.*

*Almost.*

Ginny sprinted up the hall, hearing Crabbe and Goyle’s thunderous steps behind her. A right, a left, another left—

*Oh no, oh no, I haven't been down here before, I think I'm lost—*

She chose corridors at random, bolting away from the pounding feet, but always seeming to hear them ahead as well as behind—

*I refuse to let it end like this. I will not be caught!*

But she was starting to tire, and her pursuers showed no signs of slowing.

*If there really is someone else around here on our side, now would be a good time for some help...*

---

Harry snatched the Map from Neville, staring down at the dot labeled “Ginny Weasley,” which was wending its way through a maze of halls, hotly pursued by “Vincent Crabbe” and “Gregory Goyle.” His face went hard, and Neville edged surreptitiously back.

*If You-Know-Who could see him like this, maybe the war would be over already...*

“Oh no you don’t,” Harry said softly. “Not when I’m right here. I’ll go up there and—”

“And what?” said Neville, his mouth moving without consent from his mind.

Harry lifted his head and subjected Neville to the full force of his glare. Neville wanted to flinch, but reminded himself of what he’d already been through this year and held firm. “If you’re not ready to finish the fight, you can’t go in there,” he said. “Half the school’s on You-Know-Who’s side, they’d turn you in for a tin Knut, and there’s two hundred thousand Galleons on your head —”

“So should I just sit here?” Harry demanded. “And let this happen?” His finger jabbed down at the Map.

Automatically, Neville looked where Harry was pointing. “Let what happen?” he said. “There’s nothing there except the kitchens.”

“Typical.” Harry glowered at the Map. “The one time something’s happening worth watching—”

He went utterly still for one second, then aimed Neville's wand towards himself and began to mutter. Neville caught only the last word: “*Now.*” Then Harry pointed the wand in the direction of the distant castle.

“*Expecto patronum!*”

## Be Careful 67: How You Defend Yourself

Ginny leaned against the stone wall, panting. Her heart pounded as she pointed the wand in her awkward grasp first at Crabbe, then at Goyle, trying to keep them both covered where they stood smirking at opposite ends of the hallway they'd trapped her in.

*This had better work.*

Crabbe pounced first. "Got it!" he shouted, snatching the wand from Ginny's left hand while it was pointed at Goyle. "Now Blaise will love me!"

"No!" Goyle pounded in and caught Ginny's wrist in his enormous, sweaty hand. "He wanted her, not her wand! I have her and he will love me!"

Ginny brought her knee up fast and hard, and Goyle's gleeful expression was replaced by shock, then, very slowly, by pain. He released her and staggered back against the other wall, whimpering.

Crabbe laughed and snapped the wand he still held between his hands easily. "There, now you can't take it back," he said, dropping the pieces and reaching for his own wand. "Be good and I won't hurt you too much..."

Ginny demonstrated the draw that had won her four duels out of five in DA days. "*Petrificus Totalus*," she hissed, and Crabbe's hand went rigid around his wand before he could get it out. He teetered for a moment, then started to fall. Ginny, feeling charitable, caught him with a quick "*Wingardium Leviosa*" and lowered him to the flagstones.

"That was Zabini's wand you broke," she said, Stunning Goyle as he began to take an interest in the world outside his own personal agony. "I don't think he'll love you much now. And for future reference, I'm right-handed."

She turned on her heel and marched away, making each step loud and deliberate to conceal how much her knees were shaking. If she could just find a landmark, the Potions classroom for preference, or a stairway, any stairway, providing it went up...

Rough hands against her back sent her flying, her wand clattering away down the corridor as she lost her grip. She couldn't hold back a little cry of pain when her knees and wrists hit the stone floor.

“That’s right,” hissed a voice from behind her, and Zabini stalked into view, hands fisted and eyes blazing. “Crawl and whine like the little bitch you are. Not so proud now, are you? Not so high and mighty? You’ll come to heel when I’m through with you. They all do. You’re no different, not really—”

Ginny launched herself forward, slamming her full weight against Zabini’s legs. They fell together in a tangle of robes and limbs, flailing at one another. A heavy blow to the back of the head made Ginny’s eyes blur for a moment, but she kicked back and heard a grunt of pain. Another kick and she was momentarily free, free to snatch up her wand and point it back at Zabini, but he was close enough to shove it away or grab it before she could get a spell out, and his hand was coming around to do just that—

A loud whipcrack, a sound like an explosion, and Zabini shot backwards away from her until he crashed into the wall at the end of the corridor, fifty feet away.

*Did I do that?*

Warmth blossomed on the back of her left hand, and the world went black and closed in on her, squeezing her in a merciless grip. She tried to shriek, but there was no air, no sound, nothing—

And then everything came back, and she gasped in a breath and started to scream, but a tiny hand covered her mouth before she could.

“We must be quiet, mistress,” said a croaking voice. “You are not safe yet.”

Ginny nodded slightly, and the hand was taken away. Moving deliberately, she straightened her hair, repaired the rip in her robes, and slid her wand away, all the time never turning her head to look at her rescuer.

*I think I’m hoping it isn’t who I know it is.*

Finally, it couldn’t be put off any longer. Ginny turned.

Wearing a plain white tea towel for a kilt and an ornate locket around his neck, far cleaner than she had ever seen him—

*And calling me ‘mistress’ for some reason—*

Standing beside her in this nondescript stretch of Hogwarts corridor was Kreacher, the Blacks’ mad house-elf.

*Though he doesn’t look quite so mad anymore...*

---

Harry relaxed all at once, closing his eyes and even managing a small grin. “It worked,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if it would.”

“Who’s...” Neville craned his neck to read the label on the dot beside Ginny’s. “Kreacher?”

“My house-elf. He was my godfather’s, got left to me, hated me for a while, but we sorted it out over the summer. I guess he went to Hogwarts when we had to run for it after the Ministry.”

Neville nodded as if he understood this, making a mental note that there were several stories here he’d have to ask for when the war was over. “That message was to him?”

“Right. Ordering him to protect Ginny, keep her safe. Take her somewhere out of harm’s way.” Harry’s eyes opened and fixed on Neville. “So. How long has this been happening?”

“How long has what been happening?”

“Don’t play stupid. That.” Harry slapped at the Map, now showing the dungeons again, Crabbe, Goyle, and Zabini motionless, one human and one house-elf moving swiftly through the corridors nearby. “And don’t try to tell me you don’t know or this is the first time. I won’t buy it.”

Neville considered lying anyway, but he’d never been any good at it. “It started the second day of fall term,” he said. “Snape stopped it from ever going this far before, but he can’t stop them from talking. And he’s out of the castle today. Zabini must’ve figured, if it was already done by the time Snape got back...”

Harry tightened his grip on Neville’s wand. Neville couldn’t stop his faint noise of protest, and Harry’s shoulders sagged. “Sorry.” He opened his fingers carefully, releasing the wand, and passed it back with his left hand. “I just...”

“Don’t like seeing your girlfriend get chased by Slytherins?” Neville suggested.

“Ex-girlfriend,” Harry corrected half-heartedly. “We broke up.”

Neville snorted. “Yeah, you broke up. Maybe Crabbe and Goyle believed it, Harry. Nobody else did.”

Harry rubbed the fingers of his right hand along the line of his scar, shutting his eyes again. “Was it that obvious?”

“Yes.”

The left hand joined the right. “I don’t know what to do,” Harry said in a monotone. “I know what I want to do, but it’s a terrible idea, and I know what I’m supposed to do, but I don’t know how...”

Neville listened in silence. *I thought you had the answers, he made himself not say. I thought you knew what was going on. I thought Dumbledore had left you some great plan, a roadmap or a list of directions or something. I didn’t think you were just as confused and frustrated and scared as I am.*

“But I know what I have to do.” Harry let his hands fall to his lap and opened his eyes once more.

“I have to keep going. We all do.”

“Because if we don’t...” Neville let the end of the sentence go unsaid.

*Because if we don’t, You-Know-Who gets to win.*

*I’m not ready to let him.*

*Looks like Harry isn’t either.*

“Thanks for the Map,” he said, drawing his wand. “What’s the password again to turn it off?”

“Mischief managed,” Harry recited. “But don’t blank it yet, I want to make sure—hey, where’d they go?”

“What?” Neville looked down. Ginny and Kreacher had indeed vanished.

“Show me where they are,” Harry commanded, putting a hand on the corner of the Map.

Lines blurred and reformed to show the outline of a small, almost-circular room, with a spiral staircase outside it. Ginny’s dot was moving forward in tiny steps. Kreacher’s was motionless behind it.

“Does this thing ever show vertical lines?” Neville asked as a suspicion crept over him.

“I don’t know.” Harry looked down at the Map. “Do you?”

The green lines on the paper sprang upwards, forming a three-dimensional drawing of—

“The Head’s office?” Harry stared at the miniature Ginny, climbing down a ladder with a bulge at the side of her robes. “What’s that she’s got?”

“About that.” Neville watched Ginny kneel beside Kreacher and hold out her hand. “You won’t know this, but back in October, we tried to steal—”

“The sword of Gryffindor, yeah, we heard,” Harry interrupted. “Never mind how right now. Snape sent it off to Gringotts, didn’t he? What’s it got to do with anything?”

“Well, Ginny had this idea—”

Girl and house-elf vanished from the picture, which melted back into the lines of ink on the Map. As the last speck disappeared, there was a loud double crack, like two doors slamming a second apart.

“It’s never done sound before,” said Harry, frowning at the parchment. “I hope it isn’t—”

“That wasn’t the Map,” Neville said, staring over Harry’s shoulder.

Harry turned to follow his line of sight.

Hermione was gaping like a Muggleborn first year, an even more impressive expression on Daphne Greengrass' face. A snowball fell unthrown from Ron's hand. "What are *you* doing here?" he demanded in Theodore Nott's voice. "I thought you weren't allowed in Hogsmeade anymore!"

---

A good house-elf, Kreacher considered, should always know what his master truly wanted, as well as listening to what he said. Anticipating needs was the best way to make any master happy, and a happy master, in the long run, made for guests, parties, and big families, which was the best way to make any house-elf happy.

Master Harry, judging by the things he'd said in his sleep at the House, truly wanted the Weasley girl. From what Kreacher had heard and seen at Hogwarts, the Weasley girl wanted Master Harry as well. Kreacher knew his old mistress would have considered the girl a blood traitor, not fit to cross her doorstep, but he also knew that Master Harry was a good master and deserved happiness. Besides, times had changed and Master Harry's family would be safe no matter what.

That was, if Master Harry himself survived the war.

Helping his master survive had become Kreacher's highest priority. It was for that reason he had hidden when the Death Eaters came to the House, for that reason he had gone to Hogwarts and made his peace with Dobby. It had taken some fast talking before Dobby was convinced of Kreacher's change of heart, but once it was established, the two elves had forged a sturdy alliance. The other house-elves, bound though they were to support the Headmaster, were nonetheless disgusted by what they saw happening to the students in their charge, and brought news from all corners of the castle to Kreacher and Dobby.

*And then the Malfoy boy came along with his plots and plans, and now the portrait of the old Headmaster plans and plots as well, oh yes, oh yes indeed...*

Kreacher peered out from among the trees where he was now standing. His mistress-to-be was staring at two people she thought were her enemies, but Kreacher had directed his Apparition to the place where his master was and suspected these two were the Weasley boy and the Muggleborn girl in disguise. The master must be nearby, hiding under his magical cloak.

*The mistress-to-be is a smart girl. Thinking to ask Kreacher if he could take her up to the Headmaster's office, so that she could steal as she had planned. But she did not know that Kreacher was ordered by his master to take her out of harm's way... and from today it is quite clear that the Malfoy boy and the old Headmaster were right in what they said, that she is in harm's way anywhere in the castle, so to be out of harm's way she must leave it altogether...*

Kreacher did love it when desire and duty came together.

The mistress-to-be spun around and raced away. Simultaneously, Kreacher heard the bang of another house-elf Apparating, some distance off.

*Now the Malfoy boy will be able to say that he could not have arranged for Professor Slughorn to find the foolish Slytherins and the remains of the dark boy's potion, for of course Draco Malfoy left the castle with the other students this morning—how else could he have come here to Hogsmeade, where clearly he is now? He cackled to himself, muffling the noise in his tea-towel kilt. Wizards can be so blind.*

The disguised friends of the master were chasing after the mistress-to-be, and Kreacher could feel his master's sense moving further away, following invisibly. He longed to follow, but Master Harry had a mission and an old house-elf would be a distraction, not a help.

*Besides, the master cannot live in a proper House while the war is happening. He must live in...*

Kreacher shuddered and could not finish the thought. It was a disgrace, but the war would soon be over. Then the master could return to the House and all would be well again.

*And perhaps, with Kreacher's small help of today, soon will be sooner.*

---

Ginny pounded through the back alleys of Hogsmeade, hearing Nott and Daphne Greengrass shouting something behind her but not stopping to listen. Here and there a spell shot towards her as students ran to see what the noise was. She dodged and ducked, clinging desperately to the lump of fabric under her left arm.

*Stupid house-elf—I should have known better than to trust him, no matter what he said about Harry...*

A pair of Slytherin girls her own age darted out from an adjoining alley to cut her off. Ginny skidded to a halt, reaching for her wand, but it was too late. Both girls had theirs out and pointed already, and the one on the right was grinning meanly. “Try,” she said over her friend's sniggering. “Just try.”

*Can this get any worse?*

Alecto Carrow's wheezing laugh rang out, and Ginny's heart sank through the bottoms of her shoes.

*I had to ask.*

“Got you this time, girly!” the Muggle Studies professor cackled. “Off school grounds without permission, and won't we just have fun getting you to tell us how you did it!”

“She's got something, Professor,” said the girl who'd been laughing, pointing at the lump under Ginny's robes. “I bet she stole it.”

“Another charge, another punishment!” Alecto was beaming all over her face as Ginny turned to look at her, incidentally putting her back towards one of the alley's walls. Behind the professor,

Nott and Greengrass had their own wands out, but their faces looked—

*Worried?*

*Why would they care about me?*

Ginny pushed the thought aside and concentrated on the moment. She was a Gryffindor. She tried every day to be worthy. And now she was in trouble, and needed help as much as Harry ever had against the basilisk.

*If this is ever going to work, it needs to be now...*

The cloth against her side grew heavy with a familiar shape. In one swift motion, Ginny drew the sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat and brought the silver blade up to guard position.

“Come and get me,” she said.

## Be Careful 68: What You Touch

“Come and get you, dearie? Of course!” Alecto cackled again and raised her wand.

Ginny braced herself to sweep the sword around to block the spell, praying it would work the way she needed it to. *Spells ricochet off mirrors, so a shiny sword blade should—*

Alecto gasped. For one instant, her dumpy figure was outlined in red. Then she crumpled into the dirty snow of the alleyway, her wand dropping from her hand.

Nott and Greengrass looked at each other, then pointed their wands at the sixth year Slytherins. “*Stupefy!*” they shouted in unison.

Ginny barely had time to assimilate this when invisible hands seized her from behind, an arm going around her waist and strong fingers closing around hers where they gripped the sword. She shouted and tried to kick her captor’s shin, but he dodged the kick and turned in place, and the darkness of Apparition closed down around them both.

*I wanted to get away from Hogwarts, but not like this.*

She braced herself, tightening her grip on the sword. No matter who this was or what they thought they were kidnapping her for, she wasn’t going cheaply.

*And if they try to use me to influence Harry, I’ll spit in their eyes. At the least.*

A forest clearing snapped into being around them. Ginny shoved herself free and spun, swinging the sword around at—

Nothing.

Which swore in a familiar voice as a human-sized depression appeared on the snow at her feet. Ginny jumped back, bringing the sword to bear again. “Stay away from me,” she warned, her temper rising higher than ever. *How dare you, whoever you are, how dare you sound like that—*

“If you say so,” said the voice, and the air over the depression rippled, revealing a weary-looking Harry Potter, shoving himself upright with his Invisibility Cloak over his arm. “Watch where you’re pointing that, will you? It’s full of basilisk venom and we haven’t got a phoenix around this time.”

“This time?” Ginny scoffed aloud. “I don’t know who you are, but stop pretending you were there. I’m not fooled.”

Harry sighed. “I wasn’t hoping for kisses and flowers, but a ‘hello, Harry, how are you’ wouldn’t have gone wrong,” he said. “Dating opportunities really have been thin on the ground out here.” The small, tender smile Ginny had noticed he only used for her appeared on his face. “I hope that’s enough of a silver lining for you.”

The point of the sword fell into the snow as Ginny leapt forward, throwing her left arm around Harry’s neck and pulling his face down to her own. His arms wrapped around her, his lips found hers, and for a few breathless moments the world was perfect. Tears tried to form in Ginny’s eyes, but she willed them away sternly. Harry hated girls who cried all the time.

*Though after the day I’ve had, I might be entitled...*

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered when she could speak again.

“So have I.” Harry stroked a strand of hair out of her face. “You, I mean, not me. I don’t miss me.”

“It’d be a good trick if you did.”

“Yeah, it would.” Harry’s smile seemed to chase a few of the ghosts from his eyes, making him look his proper age for the first time. “So, who do I have to kill? Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, or all three?”

“How did you know about that?”

“I had the Map going. It’s the reason we were here, to give it to Neville. Luna’s letter said he’d need it.”

Ginny nodded. “He’s been trying to keep the DA going, but he doesn’t dare use the Room of Requirement too often and the Carrows have worked out that he’s the one to watch. With the Map, he’ll be able to see them coming.”

“Good. But you never answered my question.” Harry hoisted Ginny off her feet playfully, making her squeak. “Who am I hanging upside down by his bollocks from the Astronomy Tower?”

Before Ginny could answer, a loud crack sounded and Theodore Nott materialized beside them. Ginny started to bring the sword up, but Harry’s hand closed around hers as he set her down. “It’s all right,” he said. “It’s not Nott.”

“Had that stutter long?” Nott inquired, brushing snow off the shoulder of his cloak. “Hullo, Ginny, Luna’s dad get there all right? Mum and Dad like the note I sent with him?”

Ginny relaxed, realizing who this must be. “Mum cried for an hour,” she said. “Dad laughed all day. And you’d better get out of those clothes before your potion wears off or you’re going to get

stuck in them.”

“Yeah, I know.” Ron pulled off the Slytherin-crested cloak and dropped it, kicking it to one side. “Sorry I’ve been so long, Harry. I forgot where we set up and I’ve been trying all over. Finally thought to use the Deluminator. Say, where’s Hermione?”

Ginny felt Harry stiffen. “We thought she was with you,” he said.

“She was—I saw her getting ready to Apparate—” Ron’s eyes went wide, a less impressive sight than usual on Nott’s skinny face. “You don’t think she got *caught*, do you?”

“She’d better not have.” Harry made the declaration in a flat voice which was more frightening than any shout could have been. “I’ll take the Cloak and start looking. You get another dose of Polyjuice and some for Ginny, grab another Slytherin girl for her, but make it fast, we only have about twenty minutes before Hermione’s potion wears off and they find out who she is—”

A second crack cut Harry off in mid-word, as Daphne Greengrass appeared. “Here I am,” she panted, running to Ron and throwing her arms around him. “It’s all right, it’s me, I just got delayed.”

“Prove it,” Harry said.

“You’ve got a scar on your chest from the locket Horcrux and one on your arm where Nagini bit you Christmas Eve and Ron and I figured out how to do this while we were waiting for you to wake up,” recited Hermione in rapid succession, before turning to Ron and demonstrating “this.”

Ginny leaned up towards Harry’s ear. “Even knowing who they are,” she whispered, “that’s still incredibly disturbing.”

“Yeah, it is.” Harry freed one hand and whistled between his fingers. “Can you wait a few minutes for that?” he suggested when Ron and Hermione looked up. “We should pack up the tent and get out of here. They’re going to be searching all around the village pretty soon, if they’re not already.”

“Good idea,” said Ron, disengaging. “Give this stuff a chance to wear off. Not that you aren’t beautiful no matter what,” he added to Hermione, “but I prefer your real face.”

Hermione’s cheeks went pink, and she smacked him in the back of the head. “It’s been nice being able to do that without straining my arm,” she said, drawing her wand. “Now, let me think... *Finite Incantos Protectionem!* ”

The patch of empty air where Hermione’s wand was pointing turned into the tent Ginny remembered from the Quidditch World Cup. Ron pulled out his own wand and began removing tent pegs with it, while Hermione took the beaded bag she’d carried at Bill and Fleur’s wedding from her pocket and opened it.

“Shouldn’t you be helping?” Ginny asked Harry curiously.

“I can’t.” Harry reached into his robes and pulled out his mokeskin pouch. From it he produced the old Snitch Dumbledore had left him, a sheet of yellowed parchment, a fragment of glass, and —

“Oh no,” Ginny breathed, reaching out to touch the two halves of Harry’s holly wand, connected by the thinnest imaginable thread of phoenix feather. “What happened?”

“The whole story’d better wait until we’re settled somewhere else, but I can give you the highlights.” Harry slid his possessions back into their pouch and returned it to its place. “Christmas Eve, You-Know-Who’s snake, and Ron saving my life.”

“By breaking your wand.”

“By cutting the head off the damn snake,” Harry retorted. “The wand was an accident.”

Ginny nodded absently. Her attention had been caught by something else. “Christmas Eve, was it? Is this that ‘close call’ Ron wrote us about?”

“Well, that was part of it—”

“*Part of it?*”

“Fight later,” said Ron, putting a hand on Harry’s and Ginny’s shoulders and propelling them each a step backward. “Ready when you are, Harry.” Behind him, Hermione tucked the beaded bag back into her pocket. The tent had vanished.

“Right.” Harry shook out the Cloak and held it up. “Here, Ginny, come on under. I’ll take you Side-Along.”

Ginny ducked under the Cloak, holding the sword against her chest, her heart singing. *They aren’t sending me away... they haven’t said a word about “you’re too young” or “we should take you home”...*

“Where are we going?” Hermione asked. “Back to the Burrow?”

*I spoke too soon.* Ginny’s good mood evaporated. *I know that’s where I ought to go, but I’ve never wanted anything less—*

*Except maybe Zabini, but that’s beside the point.*

“Not yet,” said Harry, joining Ginny under the Cloak. “That’s the first place they’ll look, after they get done in Hogsmeade. Besides, we need to talk.” He glanced down at Ginny, making eye contact brief enough to be unreadable. “There’s a lot we still don’t know.”

*That makes two of us, Potter.* Ginny clamped her free hand around Harry’s wrist as he gave Ron and Hermione their Apparition coordinates. *And I’m not letting you get away with “it’s a secret” this time.*

*I want to know everything.*

---

Harry kept sneaking looks at Ginny as they packed snow into the teakettle together. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed her until she arrived.

*But she needs to go home. She can't stay with us. It's too dangerous for her out here. Besides, she's under the Trace until August. We can't afford to have someone along who can't do magic. They're a liability.*

*So what does that make you then, O Wandless One?* asked a traitorous voice from the back of his mind.

*That's not the same. I can do magic, just...*

*Not without borrowing Ron's or Hermione's wand,* the voice finished for him. *Which means, if the three of you were to get attacked, only two of you could fight at a time. How is that different from having Ginny here?*

*It just is,* Harry argued. *She'll stay long enough to tell us what's happening at Hogwarts, and we'll find some way to explain why we need the sword. And then we'll take her home. She'll be safe there.*

*As safe as she was at Hogwarts?* the voice asked slyly.

"Done," Ginny said, dusting off her hands. "Harry, are you all right?"

"Yeah." Harry wiped his forehead with his snowy hand, trying to cool the ache in his scar. "Still busy being happy to see you."

Ginny smiled. "I wouldn't mind if you showed me how happy you were again..."

Five minutes later, they returned to the tent, where Ginny politely towed the once-more-brown-haired Hermione away from the stove and turned the remains of last night's dinner into a lunch the likes of which Harry had only experienced at Hogwarts or the Burrow. "I knew none of you cooked, but this is ridiculous," she said at the table. "What have you been eating? Tinned spaghetti and scrambled eggs this whole time?"

Harry and Ron, back to his usual red hair and freckles, glanced guiltily at each other. "More or less," Harry admitted.

"Typical."

"If I'd known we were going to rough it, I'm sure I would have asked your mum for some cooking lessons," Hermione said, her lips twitching. "Or maybe Ron could have. I'd half-expected that he'd have paid attention to how it was done, since he likes the end product so much."

“Pay attention?” Ginny looked her brother up and down. “Are we talking about the same Ron I know?”

Ron growled and took a swipe at Ginny. She ducked, laughing. “So who starts?” she asked, sitting back up. “You or me?”

“You,” said Harry, taking a sip of his tea. “You’re the only one who knows your story, so we should get it over with before we all start talking at once trying to tell you what we’ve been doing.”

“All right.” Ginny sat back in her chair. “The summer was actually pretty quiet for us after you left...”

Harry listened to the story of a term and a bit at Hogwarts and the tense Christmas holiday in between, filling in the blanks Ginny left with what Neville had told him and his own imagination. Hermione looked intensely interested at the tale of the creature which had joined Ginny, Neville, and Luna for their detention in the Forest with Hagrid, but the expression vanished in laughter when Ginny got to the farting Slytherins. Finally came the story of that day, how Ginny had escaped from Zabini’s nefarious plans, and Ron had to be thumped on the back after watching her reenact Crabbe and Goyle’s declarations of love.

“I hope there’s no way to reverse the stuff,” he said when he’d got his breath back. “Or the antidote takes a year to make. You’re a genius, Ginny. I only wish I could’ve been there.”

Ginny took a bow from her chair. “Now it’s your turn,” she said, looking at Harry. “And I want the whole story. No more things you can’t tell me.”

Harry swallowed. “Ginny...”

“Dad and Mum have their plan all ready,” Ginny continued, her eyes unmoving from Harry’s. “They’ll go to Auntie Muriel’s and set up a Fidelius Charm there, with Dad as the Secret-Keeper. Fred and George will probably come along, if only to have a safe place to run their mail-order business, and Lee will set up *Potterwatch* in the back bedroom. Is there anyone on that list you think would go over to the Death Eaters?”

“No, but...”

“But nothing, Harry. There’s such a thing as being too secret.” Ginny waved a hand at the sword of Gryffindor, resting in one of the tent’s old armchairs. “The sword came to me this time. That means I have to be part of this too. So I’d like to find out exactly what it is I’m part of.”

Harry looked at Hermione, who nodded uncertainly, then at Ron, who was shaking his head with worried eyes, then back at Ginny. “I don’t want you to get hurt,” he said. “There are people who’d kill you to keep this information from getting out.”

“At this point, there are people who want to kill me just for being who I am,” Ginny countered.

“Or for fighting back, or for making them look like fools.” She shut her eyes for a moment, looking tired, then continued. “It’s too late for you to protect me, Harry. My life’s on the line just like yours and Ron’s and Hermione’s are. I think I deserve to know why.” Her eyes reopened and refocused on Harry. “Tell me everything.”

Harry opened his mouth to say no, then closed it.

*She’s been fighting worse enemies than we have, every day of these past four months. Maybe we were cold or hungry sometimes, but she never knew when she was going to be attacked next, or by whom. Sometimes she did things even when she knew they’d get her punished. And she tried to get the sword for us even when she didn’t know why we needed it, or how she’d get it to us.*

*She’s been as much a part of this war as we have.*

He sat up straight and started to tell her everything.

Everything took a surprisingly short amount of time to tell. Ginny seemed unsurprised to hear that the diary which had possessed her in her first year had held a part of Voldemort’s soul, and got up to caress the pommel of the sword when Harry explained why they needed it now. “So Luna sent you the cup?” she asked, her fingers still trailing across the red stones set into the sword’s hilt. “Can I see it?”

“Right over here,” said Harry, shoving back his chair and getting up. “We keep it in plain sight to be sure no one’s sneaking off for a little lovefest with it.”

Ron puckered his lips and made kissing noises, sending Hermione and Ginny into giggles as they all gathered around the low table which held Helga Hufflepuff’s cup. Ginny had the sword in her right hand again, the point trailing along the carpet as she knelt before the table.

“So this is a Horcrux,” she said, her voice dreamy. “I wonder…”

“No!” Harry shouted, but he was too late. Ginny’s left hand was already stroking the rim of the cup.

“Well, well, ” said a familiar hissing voice. “*What a pleasant surprise.* ”

## Be Careful 69: How You Tempt

A plume of smoke billowed upwards from the place where Ginny's hand rested on the rim of Hufflepuff's cup and took shape before the friends' appalled eyes. Tom Riddle, the young man with hungry eyes Harry remembered from the memory involving Hephzibah Smith, smiled coldly at them, then turned his attention to Ginny, who was staring up at him as though under Imperius.

"No!" Harry shouted again, this time to Ron and Hermione, who had both started forward, drawing their wands. "Don't! She has to do this herself!"

*I think. I hope.*

*But the sword came to her. That counts for something.*

"She can do this," he said, spreading his arms to hold them back. "We have to let her."

"Such a touching display of faith," Riddle said, shaking his head. "A pity it comes too late. Ginny, my darling, at last we meet again..."

"I'm not your darling," Ginny whispered. "You used me."

"I was young then." Riddle's eyes darted sideways to Harry for an instant. "Foolish. I thought you were like all the others, weak, childish, fettered by ancient rules and constructs. But now I see my mistake. I treated you shamefully, Ginny, but I have not been the only one."

"What are you talking about?"

"People have tried to lock you away 'for your own good,' Ginny." The words dripped disdain. "They have treated you like a jewel which must be kept in a Gringotts vault, an artifact hidden in a secret room at Hogwarts for safekeeping. Like a thing, instead of a person with rights and a mind of your own."

"They didn't mean it that way." Ginny's eyes were fixed unwaveringly on the figure towering above her. "They only wanted me to be safe."

"But you want to be free." Riddle knelt down, bringing his face closer to Ginny's. "You want to be treated as the young lady of spirit we both know you are. Not as a child, to whom doors must be closed and secrets denied."

Slowly, as if it were against her will, Ginny nodded.

*“I can offer you that freedom.”* Riddle’s voice was as honeyed as it had been when he flattered Hephzibah, his smile as coaxing. *“I know—who better?—that age is no ironclad indicator of ability. I would give you the respect, the honor, that your courage and intelligence deserve, and that others fail to afford you for lack of a few months’ time. There need be no false choice between your freedom and your safety, for once you are under my protection, who would dare to attack you?”* A smoky hand was extended towards Ginny, palm up. *“Give me your other hand, Ginny Weasley, and I will give you your heart’s true desire.”*

“My heart’s true desire,” repeated Ginny, her face calm as she gazed up at Riddle. “What about my family?”

*“They will not be harmed,”* Riddle promised. *“Unless they break my laws, in which case they must of course suffer the consequences.”*

“Of course. No one is above the law.” Ginny closed her eyes and opened them again, a languid blink to match the feeling that time had slowed around her and the smoke-figure of Tom Riddle. “And all I have to do is give you my other hand.”

*“Yes.”* The final letter was held a moment longer than it had to be. *“Your other hand, beautiful Ginny. And then the world is yours.”*

Ron shook his head in tiny, frantic motions. Blood ran down Hermione’s knuckles where she’d bitten through the skin. Harry could hear his heart thundering against the inside of his ears.

“My other hand it is.” Ginny smiled up at Riddle. “Enjoy.”

Her right hand swung the sword of Gryffindor high and slammed it into the exact center of the cup.

Riddle shrieked, the exact sound he had made in the Chamber of Secrets when Harry used the basilisk’s fang on the diary. Ginny’s teeth were bared, both hands white-knuckled on the hilt of the sword as she leaned her weight against it, shoving it deeper into the cup. Above her, the shade of Tom Riddle writhed, howling in pain—

And then he was gone. The sword stood upright in the cup, which was deforming around the point of contact with the blade, as if the silver were red-hot. Ginny let go of the hilt, blinked a few times at the palms of her hands, and slowly began to topple over.

Harry dashed forward and caught her before she hit the floor, dropping to his knees and cradling her against his chest. She smiled sleepily up at him, lifting a hand to touch the side of his face. “You need a shave,” she whispered.

“You did it, Ginny,” said Ron in awe, bending over them. “You killed it.”

“He could only get a little way into my head this time.” Ginny yawned deeply. “So he was trying

to get me with all the wrong things. Promising me my heart's true desire, when since my first year that's been to help bring him down for good."

"And the rest of it?" asked Hermione, leaning across Harry's other shoulder.

"He offered me the world." Ginny looked from Hermione to Ron, then up at Harry again. "But the only world I want already belongs to me."

Her eyelids drifted shut, and she nuzzled her face into Harry's robes and sighed in contentment before her breathing settled into the soft, regular pattern of sleep.

Hermione chuckled. "Weasleys two, Horcruxes zero," she said. "Three if you count the snake."

"That means the last one's yours, whenever we find it," said Ron. "Since Harry had his turn way back in second year. But that leaves us right back where we were—we don't know where the last one is, or even what it is, and we haven't got a clue where to start looking..."

"Don't we?" said Harry, still looking down at Ginny's sleeping face.

"Well, *I* don't." Ron sat down on the floor and leaned back against the bunk bed. "Do you?"

"I think I might." Harry eased Ginny into a more comfortable position. "It was in what Riddle said. That we were treating Ginny like a jewel to get locked up at Gringotts, or an..."

"Artifact," Hermione filled in. "To be hidden in a secret room at Hogwarts." Her eyes widened. "Oh, Harry, you don't think—"

"Why not?" Harry looked at his friends, feeling a grin sneak onto his face and not bothering to stop it. "He was talking about where he'd put something valuable. What's more valuable to him than these?" He nodded towards the cup, now sagging to one side as the venom spread through the metal. "The last one is either at Gringotts or at Hogwarts. I'd bet my vault on it."

"But it won't be in your vault," said Ron. "It'll be in a Death Eater's. And they're all purebloods, old families, the kind with the vaults that're supposed to be guarded by dragons or only opened once a decade. How're we going to get in one of those?"

"Hogwarts isn't much better," Hermione added. "It's so big, with so many secret hiding places... even Dumbledore didn't know everything about it, and he'd been Headmaster for all those years. And it doesn't help that we don't know what we're looking for. Maybe we've already seen it, like we did with the locket..." She frowned. "Wait, the locket. Ginny touched that, back when we were cleaning out Grimmauld Place. She even tried to open it. Why didn't it do this to her then?"

Harry shrugged. "Kreacher said he tried to destroy it with magic," he said. "Maybe some of that magic damaged it or put it to sleep, so that it needed to be near somebody longer to start affecting them. Or maybe not. We'll never know. And you're both right. We're not finished yet. But aren't we a lot closer than we were yesterday?"

“I think you’re just in a good mood because you got snogged today,” said Ron, trying and failing to get a decent older-brother glare going.

Hermione giggled. “It certainly works on you,” she said. “But you’re right too, Harry. We are a lot closer than we were. We have the sword, we have two places the last one might be, and who knows? Maybe Luna will send us another letter.” Her eyes were momentarily hooded. “Or maybe Luna’s friend will.”

“Whoever that is,” said Ron. “All right, Hermione, you want guard duty or dishes?”

“I’ll get the dishes started, and then there’s a passage in *Secrets of the Darkest Art* I wanted to reread, but after that would you like some company?”

“Company sounds good.”

Harry tuned out the ensuing affectionate banter in favor of hoisting Ginny into his arms. Even asleep and limp, she weighed hardly more than a whisper, and he lifted her easily to the bunk above Hermione’s.

“Sweet dreams,” he said, dropping a kiss on her cheek. She smiled in her sleep.

A flaw in his plan occurred to Harry at this point. If Ginny woke up suddenly, she wouldn’t know where she was, and she might fall off the bunk. He could conjure a rail for it, but he didn’t want to interrupt Ron and Hermione just to borrow one of their wands, and Ginny was lying on hers. But there was another way to make sure she wouldn’t fall...

---

The sun was halfway down the sky when Hermione excused herself to Ron and went back into the tent, pulling out her wand. Harry and Ginny lay side by side on the top bunk, asleep.

*I know it sets off all Ron’s protective instincts to see them like this, but I think it’s sweet. Harry deserves a little happiness after all he’s been through. And maybe Ginny can get his mind off the Deathly Hallows, help him see it’s just a story and the Elder Wand can’t be real...*

*But whether she can or not, and whether she goes home or stays here with us, she needs to be protected. And that means letting the right people know that she’s safe, so they won’t go looking for her and accidentally find us all.*

She climbed up on her own bunk and laid her wand against Ginny’s temple. *Forgive me, but it’s important.*

Under her breath, she whispered the incantation for copying a memory.

---

Ron half-turned around at the muffled popping noise from inside the tent. *What is she doing in there? It sounds like she just opened a butterbeer. Something to drink would be nice...*

Sure enough, a few moments later the sound was repeated, and Hermione stuck her head out the tent flap. "Hot or cold?" she said.

"You have to ask?" Ron waved a hand at the snowy landscape all around them. "Hot, please."

"Hot it is." Hermione emerged with two open bottles in her hand and tapped her wand against each of them before handing Ron one. "Cheers."

"Cheers." Ron clinked his bottle with Hermione's and drank deeply, savoring the taste. "Damn, that's good. What did you do, Apparate to the Three Broomsticks?"

He thought he saw an instant of panic in Hermione's eyes before she started to laugh.

*No, I'm imagining things again. Drink your butterbeer and forget about it, Weasley. Life's got enough problems without you making up more.*

*And speaking of problems...*

"What're we going to do about Ginny?" he asked.

"I don't know that we're going to do anything. We're not in charge." Hermione sipped at her drink. "Though really, neither is Harry. He's just..."

"The one with nowhere else to do and a quest to finish," Ron supplied when she faltered. "And you know Mum'll go spare if we keep her out here with us."

"Yes, but how are we going to get her back to the Burrow without being caught?"

"I suppose we could take her to Bill and Fleur's..."

"We could, but then what?" Hermione held her bottle between her hands, warming them. "She still can't go home, because the Ministry's watching your family and the instant they see her they'll arrest her for running away from school. So she'll be stuck at Shell Cottage, and you *know* how she feels about Fleur."

"Yeah." Ron examined the label on his bottle. "One or the other of them would end up at the bottom of the ocean inside ten days."

"Besides..." Hermione's voice dropped. "Ron, Harry's *happy* with her here. When was the last time you saw him smile? Really smile? He's in there now, asleep, and he looks just like he used to before any of this started. I don't want him to lose that."

"Well, I don't want my sister to get killed!"

"Neither do I, but if you'll notice, we haven't been found once since we've been out here, and I'd tend to think that means she won't be killed because they can't kill what they can't find!"

“But she might mean we’ll *get* found, because the second she does magic that little thing called the Trace goes active on her, remember?”

“As hard as this may be for you to believe, Mr. Pureblood, a person can live without doing magic for weeks or even months at a time—”

The tent flap opened from the inside. “Keep it down out here?” Harry requested, blinking near-sightedly at them both. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Ron could feel himself turning red. “Sorry,” he mumbled in chorus with Hermione.

“It’s fine.” Harry shut the flap again.

---

Ginny slipped up beside Harry and extended first his glasses, then her wand, tapping a finger to her lips. Harry nodded, took the wand, and cast a quick “*Muffliato*” on the flap. “Thanks,” he said, offering it back.

Ginny waved him off. “It’s a gift. Keep it.”

“What? I can’t keep your wand!”

“Why not? I’m not going to need it, no matter what I do now.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah. We should talk about that.”

“We should.” Ginny took his hand and led him into the sitting area of the tent.

*I wish I could tell you how much I love you. How much I want to be with you every second of every day. But that would only scare you right now.*

*Let me see if I can’t do it another way.*

“Will you tell me the truth about something?” she asked when they were both sitting down.

“Mm-hmm.” Harry was inspecting her wand. “Is this pine?”

“Pine and phoenix feather, nine and three-quarter inches, and don’t change the subject. Would you send Ron and Hermione home if you thought it was safe for them to go?”

Harry’s head snapped up. “How did you know that?”

“Because I know you, Harry.” Ginny tried not to laugh at his half-panicked, half-guilty expression. “You want to take all the danger on yourself and keep the rest of the world completely safe. And at the very end, that’s how it will have to be. You versus You-Know-Who, without anybody else there to help. But Harry, this isn’t the end yet. And you still need help.”

Harry slumped in his chair. "I'm doing what he told you about, aren't I?" he said dully. "I'm treating you like a thing. Trying to lock you up to keep you safe."

"No!" Ginny shook her head vehemently. "Harry, no, that's not how you think of me. You told me that yourself, just before Riddle started talking."

"I did?"

"You did. When you told Ron and Hermione not to help me. That I had to do it on my own. You think about me like a person, a person you care about, and you wanted me to stay in a safe place because you care about me." Ginny took a deep breath. "But it didn't work."

Harry twisted a handful of his armchair's fabric out of shape. "Tell me something I don't know."

"All right, I will." Ginny leaned forward, her heart beginning to race. "The war is everywhere, Harry. There are no safe places anymore. Some places are just safer than others." She stood up and crossed to his chair, leaning down. "And the safest place in the world for me now is right by your side," she said quietly. "Because I know what you would do to stop me from being hurt." She cracked a smile. "Besides, you'll fight so much better if you're well-fed."

Harry laughed. "And that's not mentioning that we'd have to Stun you and drag you away to get you home at this point?" he asked, reaching up to pull her down into his lap.

"Nope. Not mentioning it at all." Ginny kissed Harry's neck lightly.

"I hope you know the latest *Potterwatch* password," he murmured into her hair.

"Do broomsticks fly?"

---

"Hello, and welcome to *Potterwatch*. My name is River, and as always, I'll be your host this evening. Tonight on our show, the return of the lovely Radiance and her helpful 'Tips for Evil Overlords'! And all-new, we have Reflection the Potter Spotter and his segment on 'Where Harry Potter's Been'! But first, *Potterwatch* extends its condolences to the Weasley family on learning that Ginny Weasley has contracted spattergroit at Hogwarts, most likely from nursing her big brother Ron over the Christmas holiday just past. An alert classmate was able to get Ginny out of the castle before she became infectious, and she is currently recuperating in an undisclosed location. The Healers' prognosis is cautiously good. And now, the news..."

## **Be Careful**

### **70: Whose Heart You Claim**

“You’ve been a busy little bee today, haven’t you?” said Meghan, watching as the figure of Draco in the TVP adjusted the position of one of Nott’s legs. “First Zabini and Crabbe and Goyle, and now these two...”

“I wanted to be sure no one would blame them for what Ron and Hermione did,” Draco said with his best innocent look. “After all, if they were stuck like this, they couldn’t possibly have been running around Stunning people.”

“Especially not considering where their wands are right now.” Ron grimaced. “That looks painful.”

“I was gentle,” Draco protested. “Mostly.”

“Yeah, that’s what’s got me worried. The bit that wasn’t ‘mostly.’”

Ray leaned to one side to get a better look. “Draco, have you read the *Kama Sutra* by any chance?”

“What would give you that impression?”

“That actually looks enjoyable,” said Starwing. “Without the wands, of course. And in private. And after stretching.”

Neenie flapped a hand frantically. “Stop, please, that’s far more than I need to know about my brother’s sex life...”

“How much do you need to know about your brother’s sex life, then?” said Neville, grinning.

“Nothing!”

“Draco isn’t your brother,” said Luna. “Except honorary. So I think I can ask this.” She gave Draco her sweetest smile. “Can we try that sometime, please?”

Draco bent over the TVP’s console in a futile effort to hide his flushed face, listening to his friends snicker. “How about after we’re married,” he said.

“Oh, are we getting married, then?”

A low “Oooooo” went up from several points in the room.

Draco took his hand away from the TVP so that he had both of them free to put them over his face. *I think I've just been had. There's nowhere to go from here with any dignity or grace...*

*No, wait. There's one place. One thing I could do.*

*But it's awfully soon. We've only known each other, as more than just a bully and a freak, for a month, unless you count the stuff we were getting up to in the fall...*

Still, it was a question that would have to be addressed. The war was getting closer to its end with every day that passed.

*It'd be a lot closer if Snape didn't have those damned troll ballerinas watching the Room of Hiding. Wonder if Mum can convince him to lay off so I can get the diadem sooner rather than later?*

But whether it was sooner or later, Draco knew, the diadem would eventually be found and destroyed, just like the other Horcruxes had been. And then Harry would duel Voldemort, and—somehow—emerge victorious.

*I won't get to see it firsthand, since I need to be here before it happens or the door will slam in my face, but I'll still see it. And being here is the point I'm half-heartedly pursuing. I plan to come here to stay. Forever. And I'm working on starting that forever as soon as possible.*

*So either I say goodbye to Luna and send her home to her dad, to finish Hogwarts and become a famous naturalist and marry some relative of the bloke who wrote our Care of Magical Creatures text, or...*

Or he could do what he was considering at this very moment.

*Luna certainly seems willing. And I don't think Mum would approve quite so strongly of the two of us if she hadn't checked us out pretty thoroughly for staying power. There's Ray and Starwing to consider, too...*

*Ah, the hell with it. Only way out of this one is forward.*

Draco turned around, took Luna's hand in his, and went down on one knee, reveling in the little gasps and squeals from the girls and the knowing chuckles from the boys. “I'm sorry this moment finds me materially unprepared,” he said, putting on an expression of great sadness. “But we can fix that later.” He dropped the acting and let his true feelings shine out. It wasn't hard; Luna's own face was so bright with joy it was nearly blinding. All he had to do was mirror her.

“Luna Lovegood,” Draco Malfoy said, clasping his love's hand in both his own, “will you make me the happiest man in this world or any other? Will you marry me?”

---

*Dear Mum,*

*She said yes.*

*More details after I stop flying without my broom.*

*Deliriously yours,*

*Draco*

---

Blaise Zabini, sore all over and grateful as never before that his skin tone made it near-impossible to see when he was embarrassed, was not pleased to see the Headmaster striding into the hospital wing with a storm brewing on his face.

*Calm, stay calm. He's probably come to lecture me for trying to make a new potion without consulting him first. Yes, that'll be it. And to get the recipe from me, so that he and Professor Slughorn can brew an antidote.* He swallowed, glancing at the screened-off beds where Crabbe and Goyle were currently housed. *I hope it can be made quickly.*

A few quiet words with Madam Pomfrey, and Snape crossed the ward in long strides and glowered down at Blaise, one hand gripping a small bottle filled with silvery liquid. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?” the older wizard demanded.

“I never intended this to happen, Headmaster,” Blaise said truthfully.

“And what did you intend to happen?” Snape’s voice was dangerously quiet, his black eyes boring into Blaise’s brown. “What was your reason for trying such a bizarre and dangerous project in such total secrecy?”

*She said no.* “I...” Blaise began.

“I see.” The tone of the voice would now have frozen a cauldronful of potion at a full rolling boil. “Have I not made it perfectly clear, Zabini, that I will *not* tolerate attacks of that sort on your fellow students? Particularly not your fellow purebloods, blood traitors or not?”

Blaise went momentarily rigid with terror. *He knows. He knows. He is a Legilimens, that rumor was true, he saw into my memories and he knows what I did—he's going to throw me out of school, send me home in disgrace, I'll never live it down—*

“You may count yourself lucky,” said Snape with maliciously perfect diction, “that you are not being expelled at this time.”

“Thank you, Headmaster!” Blaise gasped in relief.

“However.” A smile appeared on Snape’s face, the first Blaise had seen from him. It looked far more predatory than friendly. “I am sorry to inform you that, based on my preliminary analysis of

your potion, I doubt an antidote can be made. And Professor Slughorn concurs with me.”

Blaise’s elation turned to horror in an instant. *No antidote? But that means...*

“I expect you will behave politely and kindly towards your fellow students for the rest of the year,” Snape added. “All your fellow students. We will be watching to see that you do.”

And before Blaise could say another word, the Headmaster had turned and left the infirmary.

---

Far away, a different Blaise Zabini shook his head. “Stupid bastard,” he said without much heat, taking his hand away from the TVP. “He deserves it.” A smile for the tall, brown-haired girl beside him. “As much for being blind to true beauty as anything.”

Ginny humphed. “I think I’ve just been insulted,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Are you insulting my girlfriend?” Harry demanded of Blaise.

“No, I’m complimenting mine.” Blaise slid an arm around Colleen Lamb’s waist. “And congratulating myself on having excellent taste, unlike my counterpart.”

Colleen sighed. “I think what he’s trying to say,” she explained in her soft voice, “is that he’s proud of himself for having found a girl who was interested back.”

“Translating English into English now, are we?” asked Blaise, grinning at his girlfriend.

“Translating Slytherin into Gryffindor,” Colleen countered. “A far more daunting task.”

“True, true.” Blaise kissed her cheek. “I count myself lucky to have such an excellent translator around.”

“Nooooo!” The sound was barely understandable, but the heartbreaking sorrow on the face of the boy who now lurched through the audience (which was most of the sixth and seventh years currently attending Hogwarts) and fell on his knees in front of Blaise was unmistakable. “Do not kiss her! I love you!”

“You cannot love him!” shouted another boy, shoving forward to stand between Blaise and the kneeling boy with his arms crossed and a babyish pout on his face. “I loved him first!”

“I love him better!”

“I love him more!”

“I love him most!”

“Do not!”

“Do so!”

Under the cover of the audience’s laughter, Draco leaned over to Luna. “Lucky me,” he said, indicating Vince and Greg, who were now playing up their foot-stamping, each trying to outdo the other. “I get to see the real thing every day for the next however-many months.”

“It’ll get tiresome after a while, won’t it?” Luna watched as foot-stamping escalated into shoving. “I’m glad you can come here to rest.”

“Me too.” Draco laid his head against hers. “Everyone needs a rest sometimes.”

Vince and Greg’s shoving had given way to fighting, though this was mostly a matter of wildly overdone punches being swung at one another’s faces. Draco had a feeling Crabbe and Goyle weren’t going to be so restrained.

*Stupid they may be. Inaccurate with their fists they’re not.*

*And somehow I doubt they’ll ever give it a rest.*

*Good thing these two will. One of the best bits of the day is yet to come...*

---

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stared at the wireless.

“Did Lee just say...” Ginny began.

“Yeah.” Ron rubbed his right ear. “Yeah, he did.”

“Who knows that’s just a cover story?” Hermione asked. “Only your family, right?”

“Right.”

“But I bet a lot of the DA have guessed,” said Harry. “So they’ll know, or suspect, that means Ginny came with us.”

Ginny shushed him. “Listen to this,” she said, grinning. “See if you can tell who it is.”

“Welcome to the second edition of ‘Tips for Evil Overlords,’” said a familiar, dreamy voice. “I am the lovely Radiance, and tonight we’ll be covering a few basic rules for treatment of prisoners...”

“Since when is Luna sending bits to *Potterwatch* ?” Ron demanded over the admonishments to keep keys well away from cell doors, make sure there was nothing in dungeons which could be turned into ropes or weapons, and always have captives guarded and checked over by members of the same sex.

“Since a couple weeks ago.” Ginny was listening intently. “Lee said there’d be someone new on

tonight—maybe it’s this secret friend you were telling me about...”

“And now, over to my friend Reflection the Potter Spotter,” Luna said. “Reflection?”

“Thank you, lovely Radiance.” The voice which had taken Luna’s place was cheerful and quick, tantalizingly familiar to Harry’s ear but resisting identification. “I am indeed Reflection the Potter Spotter, and I’ll be telling you Where Harry Potter’s Been. Note, please, that I’m not telling you where he is . That would have fairly lethal consequences, both for him and for me. For him, obviously, because he’s got Death Eaters on his tail, and for me because... well...”

The voice took on the aural equivalent of scuffing a foot against the floor in embarrassment. “I haven’t always been as nice as I am now. Fact is, I’ve been mixed up in it with everyone who’s out there with Harry right now, and I always seem to come off worst. And that’s not even counting the man himself—ladies and gentlemen, I’ve dueled Mr. Harry Potter on at least three separate occasions, and every single one of those duels I have lost! So, for his safety and my own, my Potter Spotter reports will have a delay of exactly one week.”

Hermione was watching the wireless with a small, satisfied grin on her face. Ron was scowling, as though he too were having the unnerving feeling that he ought to be able to put a name with Reflection’s voice.

Harry took a sip of the butterbeer Hermione had left on the kitchen counter. *I’m not entirely sure it’s a name I like, either...*

“Disclaimers out of the way, let’s get to the important stuff—this is Where Harry Potter’s Been!”

What followed made Harry sit up straight. Whoever Reflection was, he had alarmingly good sources. Though the references were vague and he only ever mentioned regions, not specific towns or villages, it was obvious that he *knew* where the little tent had been pitched each and every night.

*But we’re not following a pattern. No one could predict where we are now from where we were a week ago. And he isn’t saying how he finds it out, so it isn’t like the Death Eaters are going to be able to steal his method and home in on us. He hasn’t even said we’re camping, just that we’re moving around a lot. All he seems to want to do is encourage people, let them know we haven’t dropped off the face of the earth.*

*I still don’t like it.*

*And I have a feeling I should know who’s lost that many duels with me...*

---

Severus restored the silver fog of memory to the small bottle in which it had mysteriously arrived on his desk earlier that evening. He had just finished viewing it again, and his opinion had not changed. Someone, somehow, had copied the memories of Miss Ginevra Weasley.

*And judging from Potter’s current success in keeping himself hidden and extricating himself from*

*difficulties, as much as I hate to admit it, she will be safer with him than she was here.*

*Not to mention, she has neatly solved the problem of a certain sword.*

He looked around at Dumbledore's portrait. "And how did you plan this one?" he inquired, eyebrow raised.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Severus," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling brightly. "How long do you plan to let Zabini think there is no antidote to that potion he brewed?"

"Until the end of the year should do. It will take that long to prepare in any case." *And you know precisely what I'm talking about, old man. You simply choose to ignore it. But two can play at that game.* "Has Poppy had any success yet in separating Nott and the elder Greengrass, do you know?"

"It was a difficult task," Dumbledore said gravely. "Someone apparently laid a Body-Bind over them both just as they accomplished that particular position, then dragged them to a spot where they would be seen by most of the student body returning from Hogsmeade. Still, Poppy was equal to her work. They are, as of now, free and unharmed."

*Physically, Severus had no trouble finishing. And of course, it would be too much to expect that either of them got a look at their attacker. Potter, most likely, under his father's double-damned Cloak.*

*Though it seems unlike Potter to put them on display.*

For one moment, he savored that mental image again, then replaced it with Zabini's face upon discovering he had, or so he thought, saddled himself with two overenthusiastic and oversized human lapdogs for life.

*Cecy, my love, I hope you want to laugh tonight, for I surely have the best reason for it you have seen for a long time...*

---

*Dear Draco,*

*Thank you for the letter, and the news. Imagining the reactions of some who know you in your original world has given me the second best laugh I've had all year. Though I will admit that, for one at least, I did not have to imagine...*

*Silliness aside, congratulations to you both. I will meet you in Hogsmeade next week as you asked, so that we can start planning. Love goes to Luna, and to the rest of your merry band,*

*From your delighted*

*Mum*

## **Be Careful**

### **71: Which Story You Trust**

“Malfoy?”

Draco turned, stepping to one side to let the flow of student traffic proceed around him. “Yes?” he said to the petite blonde Slytherin in her mid-teens who had addressed him.

“Are you responsible for this?” the girl demanded, holding out a photograph. Draco accepted it, looked at it, and immediately had need of the acting skill he was cultivating in the otherworld.

*I didn't realize someone brought a camera. Serves you right for trying to patronize me that one time, Nott... you, too, Greengrass, anybody dumb enough to think Dark magic is just an artistic choice...*

“I don't know why you'd think I had anything to do with it,” he said, handing the picture back to the girl.

“Well-played.” She slid the picture into a small envelope, which she tucked into one of the books she was holding. “You give the impression that you weren't involved without ever stating it outright, so technically, you're not lying. Very clever.”

“They don't give these out for nothing,” Draco said, tapping his House crest. “I don't think I caught your name.”

“I don't think I threw it.”

Draco brought up his closed fists and tapped his wrists together at right angles, a Quidditch referee's sign for a blocked shot. The girl smiled and tossed her hair over her shoulder in a strangely familiar movement. “I'd better get to class,” she said, glancing around at the hall, empty except for them. “And so should you. Say hi to Daphne for me, if she's not still hiding in her dorm.”

She turned and took three steps away, then looked over her shoulder. “For the record, Malfoy, I know you did it. I saw you.”

A stab of panic shot through Draco, but he kept his face impassive. “And I'm not in the Head's office why?” he asked, leaning against the wall nonchalantly.

The girl shrugged. “Because it was funny. Because it made sure two of our Housemates didn’t get blamed for what someone else did wearing their faces. And because I’ve been looking for a way to break up dear Daffy-waffy and Nott-Very-Bright for weeks now, and you did it for me.” Her smile appeared again, wide and bright and a trifle mocking, as though she knew a joke she wasn’t going to share. “I owe you lunch for it. Next Hogsmeade visit?”

“It’s a date. Metaphorically speaking,” Draco added quickly as the girl raised an eyebrow at him. “Am I allowed to know your name now, or do I have to keep guessing until you get my first-born child?”

The other eyebrow joined its friend. “Was that a proposition, Malfoy?”

“No, it was a botched story reference. Never mind.” Draco scrubbed his knuckles against his forehead. *Keep your worlds straight, dimwand, they don’t know Rumpelstiltskin around here.* “Your name? Please?”

“Call me Story,” the girl said quietly, her eyes fixed on his face. “Since you seem to like them so much.”

And before Draco could ask anything else, she was gone.

---

“She likes you,” Luna said with certainty as Draco took his hand away from the TVP.

“How do you know?”

Luna tapped the corner of her eye significantly. “I know.”

“Right. Seeing. Don’t you think she’s a little young for me, though?”

“She won’t always be.”

Something in Luna’s tone caught Draco’s attention. He turned to look at her straight on. “What is it?”

“She... and you...” Luna made a vague motion in the air. “There’s something around you both. I don’t understand it. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Well, whatever it is, it’s going to have to go away.” Draco snagged Luna’s waist and pulled her closer to him. She came without resistance. “Because I’m going to be gone myself, very soon now.”

“Not that soon,” said Abby, who was lying across a beanbag in the back of the room, reading her Charms text upside down. “Not until Walpurgis Night, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Draco kissed Luna on the cheek. “But still, that’s only a few months away. What could happen in a few months?”

Abby and Luna both looked at him for a moment. Draco tried to return the stares, but besides the numerical disadvantage, he had to keep turning his head to keep both girls in view. Finally Abby began to giggle, setting Luna off, and Draco scooped his fiancée into his arms and trotted across the room to plop onto the next beanbag over from his adoptive little sister.

“What would I do without you two?” he asked as Abby scrambled over to claim her hugs from both of them.

“You don’t want to know,” said Abby promptly.

“What if I do?”

“You don’t. You really, really don’t.” Abby leaned up to whisper something into Luna’s ear.

“She’s right,” said Luna, sharing a brief smile with Abby. “You don’t want to know.”

“Behold the tyranny of the so-called weaker sex.” Draco tried to get up, but the weight of reclining females on him was too much. “Guess I’ll stay here, then.”

“I guess you will.” Luna tickled his nose with a tendril of her hair. “And maybe if you’re a good boy, we won’t take pictures of you all squashed down and helpless...”

---

“So, been any good books lately?” Draco asked, handing a butterbeer across the table.

Story looked down her nose at him. “Is that a sample of your sense of humor?”

“No, it’s a sample of my awful pick-up lines. I know hundreds. Want to hear another one?”

“No, thank you, one was quite enough.” She uncorked the bottle deftly, tapped her wand against it to heat it, and took a drink. “What do you do when you’re not embarrassing your Housemates?”

“Well, I’m a part-time pirate at the moment,” Draco said, uncorking his own bottle. “But I’m going to night school to be a hidden hero helper, with a side specialty in appearing to be a junior evil bastard. It makes the big reveal at the end so much more dramatic, you know?”

The girl stared at him for several seconds, her lips slightly parted. At last, she found her voice. “Either you are completely mad...”

“Or?” Draco prompted when he felt the pause had gone on long enough. “Finish your sentence. Stories should have closure.”

Story snorted a laugh. “You’re not what I expected, Malfoy,” she said.

“Yeah, that makes two of us.” Draco blew across the top of his butterbeer bottle, making a long, low sound like the whistle of the Hogwarts Express. “I didn’t think anyone else in my House was...”

“Sane?” Story suggested. “Not all of us agree with our parents on everything, you know. Some of us like people from other Houses.” Her face hardened. “Or did.”

“You?” Draco asked quietly.

“Her name was Natalie.” Story’s voice had gone flat, and she was gripping her butterbeer as though wishing it were someone’s throat. “She was a Gryffindor. She was Muggleborn. She was my friend. And she is dead.” Her head came up, fire in her eyes. “Someone is going to pay.”

Draco leaned forward, pitching his voice to carry only as far as the girl. “Do you know names?”

“One. Only one.”

“One is all I need.” Draco smiled slowly. “Just call me... the collector.”

---

*Collecting information, at the moment. But I'll be able to move onto debts soon enough. Maybe even settle a bit of my own.*

Draco ducked a Bludger and shot up the pitch, keeping his eyes open for the telltale glint of Snitch gold. His team was slated to play the Gryffindor Fun Team next week, and Captain Artemis Moon had cautioned them all against thinking it was a pushover.

“Remember, they’re all good at trick flying,” she’d said, pushing her dark hair out of her slanted eyes. “They’ve tricked better teams than us into giving up points, or even the Snitch. Don’t let it happen to us.”

*Let some poncy Gryffindor get away with my Snitch? Ha, fat chance. It's mine, all mine, and I'll show them that!*

Draco wove his broomstick in and out of the goalposts, drifting lower on each circuit, until finally his feet were hovering just above the grass. One hand went lazily out, paused for a moment, then struck. “Gotcha,” he said with satisfaction as the Golden Snitch beat its silver wings uselessly against his fingers. “Game over.”

High above, Artemis blew her whistle, signaling her players to come in. Draco turned to see red-robed figures walking down from the castle, broomsticks over their shoulders.

*Our practice time must be up. Good thing, too. I have three essays to finish and that dead-wood-to-living-plant Transfiguration practical for McGonagall, and all my flowers keep coming out wilted...*

As the Gryffindor players drew nearer, a face at the back of the group caught Draco’s eye. Cheerful and bright, topped with gingery-blond hair, and she was pushing through the crowd to come towards him—

“Natalie McDonald,” she said, holding out her hand to him. “Seeker.”

“Draco Malfoy. Same.” Draco shook the hand of the girl whose counterpart’s murder he’d promised—*was it just yesterday?*—to help avenge. “Want it?” He held out the Snitch.

“Thanks.” Natalie accepted the tiny ball, straightening a bend in one of the wings with her wand. “Do you know my boyfriend, Graham?” She nodded towards a dark-haired boy climbing into the stands. “He’s a fourth year, like me, but a Slytherin.” A giggle, as she half-turned to wave at the boy. “I don’t think he knows who to cheer for this time!”

“He’ll work it out,” said Draco, peering up at the boy. Sure enough, the features were familiar, in the vague way of someone often seen but seldom looked at.

*Now as long as that carries over, I’ve got another member of Story’s “some of us,” and one who’ll be hungrier for revenge even than she is...*

---

“So what *would* he do without us?” Abby asked Luna over the plans the two were drawing up for their future with the boy in question (it had been decided that Draco and Luna would have four children, two boys and two girls, and that Abby would come to live with them as soon as she finished Hogwarts, since by that time they would need the extra adult around).

“Marry that girl we saw him with,” Luna said. “That’s what the funny look around them is. I worked it out a day or two ago, after I checked a few other things.”

“Brr.” Abby shivered deliciously. “I’m glad he has us. She doesn’t look very nice.”

Luna nodded. “He’d be a little bit happy,” she said. “But not very.”

Abby sat up straight, her eyes sparkling. Clearly she had just seen something. “And he’d give his son a worse name than his!” she proclaimed.

“Who would?” said Draco, coming into the room.

Luna shut the notebook they were writing in as Abby bounced up to hug Draco. “You would,” she said, beaming up at him. “If you never met us, you would.”

Draco frowned. “A worse name than mine? Is that even possible?”

Abby leaned up, and Draco down, until she could whisper in his ear. His eyes went wide. “No.”

“Yes.” Abby nodded sagely. “Really and truly.”

“Dear God, that’s bordering on child abuse!”

“Bordering?” said Luna sweetly.

Hermione later claimed she'd been able to hear them laughing from the other side of the castle.

---

“I was cleaning out my wardrobe last night,” Draco said to Luna later that night, pulling a battered book from his bag. “At the other Hogwarts, the one we came from. Thinking ahead, for when I won't be there to do it anymore.”

“And you want to save the house-elves work. How nice of you.”

“No, I just want to be sure I don't leave anything valuable behind. But that's beside the point. I found my old Astronomy text—well, I say found, it fell out on my foot—and it opened to this page.” Draco flipped open the book to the place he'd marked with a bit of parchment. “A list of meteor showers, and when they happen. There's one coming up, and Professor Sinistra said it looks like it's going to be a good one this year. Would you like to go out and watch it?”

Luna smiled. “Yes, please. On one condition.”

“What's that?”

“I want to do it in the world we came from. To have one last memory from there, before we come here forever.” She stroked his jawline tenderly. “One perfect night, with you.”

“How can I say no to that?” Draco turned his head and kissed the caressing fingers. “One last memory it is. Dress warm. It's going to be a chilly night.”

## Be Careful 72: What Sky You Watch

“Are you making your wishes?” Luna whispered as another meteor blazed its trail of light across the sky.

“What have I got left to wish for?” Draco kissed what felt like the side of her head—the darkness and the Disillusionment Charms they were both under made it hard to tell. They lay together at the top of a hill in their snow gear, the blanket wrapped around them charmed to keep dampness and cold at bay.

“How about the end of the war?”

“True enough. But I thought if you told a wish, it wouldn’t come true.”

“I haven’t told my wish. I’ve told you what you could wish for.”

“So what are you wishing for, then?”

Luna giggled. “You can’t catch me like that!”

“Can’t blame me for trying...” Draco broke off. “What’s that?”

“It sounds like someone shouting.” Luna’s warmth beside him shifted, and Draco heard the rustle of her sitting up. “More than one person. And spells. Should we go see what it is?”

*It’s none of our concern,* was Draco’s first reaction. *Why should we care about what happens to some stranger?*

*Why should anyone in the otherworld have cared about what happened to you, when you first showed up there?* whispered the same voice which had prompted him to destroy Nagini’s body on Christmas Eve. *You were a stranger to them, but they still helped you. Cared about you. Shouldn’t you do the same?*

“I don’t believe I’m listening to you,” Draco muttered under his breath. “You lost me my arm, last time...”

“What did you say?” asked Luna.

“Nothing.” Draco kicked off the covering fold of blanket. “You’re right. We should go check it out.”

“Shh!” Luna cautioned suddenly, grasping his arm. “Someone’s coming!”

Both of them went still, listening.

---

He scrambled up the hill, hearing the hoarse breathing of a goblin just behind him. The other goblin was dead, he was sure, nothing alive fell that limply, and he thought he’d seen a burst of green around one of the two men before the other one shouted at him to run—

*I should go back. I have to help him. It’s two against one. But if we can take out the one that’s chasing us—*

He burst into a clearing at the top of the hill. A yelp and a slight thud told him his companion had fallen. Turning back without stopping, he pulled out his wand, intending to Summon the goblin or pick him up with a *Mobilicorpus* —the Snatcher was still tangled in the underbrush they’d run through, he could hear the swearing from the hillside, this was their best chance—

Cloth tangled around his feet, and he fell, hitting the ground with his shoulder and knocking the breath out of himself. An invisible hand slapped over his mouth, an arm pinned his down, and a chill ran across him as his own body vanished—

*Disillusionment? But who—*

“Dean!” a girl’s voice hissed in his ear. “Dean, it’s all right, it’s me, it’s Luna!”

Dean Thomas got half a breath back into his lungs as the hand came away from his mouth. “*Luna?* What are you doing here?”

“I was watching stars with my friend—”

The Snatcher crashed through the last layer of plants and brought his wand down towards the goblin. Dean was about to bring his own up to defend, but a boy’s voice from beside him growled “*Stupefy,*” and a red beam of light outlined the Snatcher, who stiffened, then collapsed.

“Nice shooting,” Dean said shakily.

“Thanks.” The sound of someone standing up. “How many more of them?”

“Two, I think.”

“You still with Cresswell and Tonks, and those goblins?”

“How did you—”

“He just knows things,” Luna broke in. “Are you?”

“Yeah. I think Cresswell’s dead, though. And one of the goblins.”

A muttered curse. “Tonks?”

“He told me to run.” Dean pushed himself to his feet. “There were two of them down there, I have to go help him—”

“He would not thank you for returning and getting killed,” said a guttural voice as the goblin sat up. “We should go on.”

“You do what you want. I’m not leaving him.” Dean started back down the hill, feeling a guilty pleasure at the goblin’s hiss of pain when he tried to stand. For all the goblins had been outwardly polite during the months he’d spent in their company, he’d always had the feeling they considered him and the older wizards only slightly better than the Snatchers and the Death Eaters.

*They’d probably have turned us in for the reward themselves if they could have managed it without being caught...*

Rustles of cloth behind him, one stopping beside the goblin, the other following him down the hill. “Mind some help?” said the tantalizingly familiar male voice.

“Thanks.” Dean squinted at the blurred outline, trying to match it to one of his classmates. “Do I know you?”

“How about we stay with ‘Luna’s friend’ for right now.”

“All right.”

Loud laughter echoed through the trees as they reached the bottom of the hill. Dean peered through the trees and felt his stomach turn. Ted Tonks leaned weakly against a tree, his fingers pressed against his side, a dark stain spreading across his robes. His wand lay on the ground at his feet, but judging by the Snatcher sprawled several feet away, he’d managed to use it at least once before being disarmed.

*Doesn’t matter, though, not with that other one right there...*

“Get almost the same bounty for you dead as alive,” the unwashed wizard taunted, cackling coarsely through his words. “Think I’ll go for dead this time, since you killed Miller... though maybe I should let you live, give you over to the dementors...”

Dean brought his wand up and aimed carefully. He’d only get one shot at this.

“*Stupefy!*”

The Snatcher dropped where he stood. Dean ran past him, resisting the urge to kick the

unconscious wizard somewhere tender, and caught Ted as he started to fall, staggering slightly with his companion's weight until another set of hands took some of it. Together, they helped the older wizard sit down with his back against the tree.

"Are you all right, sir?" said Luna's friend, sounding surprisingly concerned. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Don't think so." Ted's breath was coming in gasps. "Lost... too much blood..."

Luna's friend whispered a spell, and the lines of pain on Ted's face eased. "Thanks... who..."

"Someone who should have known you better, sir. I'm sorry we didn't come in time."

"Don't." Ted waved the apology away. "Fortunes of war... Dean?"

"I'm here, sir." Dean removed his Disillusionment and grasped Ted's hand. "I'm not hurt."

"Good." The older wizard's eyes closed, then opened again. "'Dromeda..."

"We'll tell her," Luna's friend promised. "Your daughter too."

Ted smiled, his eyes closing again. "Thank you," he whispered. The last sound trailed off into nothingness as his head sagged back against the tree and the hand in Dean's went limp.

Dean's throat closed. Beside him, Luna's friend drew a deep, shuddering breath. "They'll pay for this," he said, his voice low and tinged with snarl. "They will pay."

"How?" Dean had to swallow before he could get more than that one word out. "You heard what that bastard said—they get paid *for* killing Muggleborns. Or bringing them in to rot in Azkaban."

"Azkaban..." The other's voice was thoughtful, and suddenly Dean placed him.

"You're Reflection!" he blurted out. "We listen to you on *Potterwatch* ! You're the one who always knows where Harry's been!"

"Well done, Thomas. And of course you already know the lovely Radiance." A hand pressed against Dean's shoulder, and he turned to see Luna enter the clearing, the goblin—Griphook, he could see now—limping beside her. "Wait here, will you, love? I'm going home to grab a few things."

"Of course," said Luna, coming over to kneel down beside Dean. A crack marked Reflection's Disapparition.

"He is dead, then?" said Griphook.

"Yeah, he's dead. Cresswell too." Dean clenched his teeth against tears. *They helped me, they looked out for me, I'd never have made it this far without them, and now they're dead, and I didn't*

*do a damn thing to help them when they needed it...*

“You made sure Mr. Tonks didn’t die for no reason,” Luna said softly. “He wanted you to be safe, and you are. And you came back, to be with him. That isn’t nothing.”

“Feels like it.”

“I know.” Luna rested her hand on his shoulder for a moment, then took it away. “I know it does.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds. Then the loud snap of an Apparition heralded the arrival of a brown-haired boy, his features reminiscent, to Dean’s eye, of Hermione Granger’s. He was holding a small canvas bag in the hand not gripping his wand. “Back,” he said in Reflection’s voice, setting the bag down on the ground. “What’s your name, goblin?”

“Griphook,” the goblin answered. “My companion was Gornuk. What about you, wizard?”

“Reflection’ll do as well as anything.” The boy flicked a glance at Luna, who had begun to giggle. “Do you have somewhere you can go, Griphook? Somebody going to want to know Gornuk’s dead?”

“He had a mate,” Griphook acknowledged. “She will want to perform the rites for him. And any search for me will be over by now, so I could hide with my people if I could reach them. But the entrances to our home caverns are guarded by wizards, and I cannot Apparate...”

“Not even if you had a wand?”

Griphook’s eyes narrowed. “Goblins cannot use wands.”

“No, goblins *may* not use wands. It isn’t the same thing.” Reflection crossed his arms. “Don’t try to tell me you don’t have a few stashed away you’ve taken off thieves, or that you don’t all take turns practicing with them, just in case those stupid laws ever get repealed.”

“Would I tell you if we did?”

“No, you wouldn’t, which is why I’m not asking. But just in case I’m right, I’m going to turn my back for thirty seconds. So will they.” Reflection jerked a thumb at Dean and Luna. “If I’m right, you won’t have any trouble grabbing that dead Snatcher’s wand and getting yourself and your friend out of here. And if they ever ask us, we can honestly say we didn’t see what happened.”

Griphook laughed. “Devious beyond your years, wizard,” he said.

Reflection dipped a shallow bow. “I do my best. Good luck to you.” He pivoted on one foot as he came up, motioning Dean and Luna to do the same.

Dean looked away, counting to himself. *Chinese Fireball one, Chinese Fireball two, Chinese Fireball three...*

He got only as far as eleven before the slammed-door sound of an unpracticed Disapparition assaulted his ears.

“Ouch,” said Reflection, shaking his head. “Hope they didn’t get splinched.”

“The goblins will help them if they did.” Luna got to her feet. “What did you go to get?”

“Show you in a minute.” Reflection looked past her to Dean. “Thomas, you up for a little role-playing?”

“What?”

“Role-playing. Acting. Pretending to be somebody else. Specifically, one of them.” Reflection nodded towards the Snatchers. “Think you can pull it off for a few minutes? You don’t have to talk, just stand behind me and nod.”

Dean pulled his thoughts together, shoving his grief aside. “Yeah, I can do that. Why?”

“Because we’re going to give this scum what they deserve.” Reflection’s voice was hard. “By playing the Ministry at their own game.”

---

Andromeda Tonks sat at her kitchen table. One hand rested lightly on the folded piece of parchment she had been given a few minutes earlier by her son-in-law, who had told her how it had been brought to his home by a young Muggleborn he had once taught at Hogwarts. He had tried to disassemble, but she had known from the look in his eyes what news the letter contained.

*Putting it off will make it no better. I must know.*

She unfolded the parchment and began to read.

*Dear Madam Tonks,*

*I am sorry to inform you that your husband, Ted Tonks, died this evening in a battle with three Snatchers from the Ministry of Magic. He killed one of his enemies before being struck down himself, and his fighting abilities allowed one of his companions, Dean Thomas, to escape capture. I was with him as he died; he did not suffer, and spoke your name before he passed.*

*You may hear news in the coming days that your husband has been captured by the Ministry and sent to Azkaban. Obviously, this is not true. What has happened is this: using magic, the aforementioned Dean Thomas and I caused the two surviving Snatchers to look like your husband and Thomas himself, and took on the semblance of the Snatchers for ourselves. Under their names and appearances, we took them to the Ministry and claimed the reward for turning in Muggleborns, causing them to be sent to Azkaban before the magic on them wore off.*

*I know that no amount of gold can repay the death of a loved one, but I thought you would want to*

*know that far from profiting from your husband's death, the men responsible have received precisely what they should have in a more just world. I wish that prejudice had not stopped me from knowing him, and you and your daughter have my deepest condolences for your loss.*

There was no signature, but a picture had been drawn across the bottom of the parchment. In the curve of a crescent moon lay a gray-scaled dragon, tears falling from its eyes. Andromeda smiled, even as her own eyes filled with tears.

“He may yet be the saving of you, Cissy,” she whispered, remembering what she had written to her baby sister the day her nephew was born. “I hope he is.”

Then her grief rolled over her like a wave of the ocean, and she had no strength left to think or hope anything, only to lay her head on her arms and let her tears flow.

The knowledge that her love had not suffered, that he had saved another's life, that the men who had killed him were being punished, would matter to her someday, just as someday she would be able to stand up and go on. Today, all she knew was that the man for whose sake she had denied everything she had been born to was dead, and all she could do was cry.

## **Be Careful**

### **73: Who You Point Out**

“Beware the prickly cat,” Ginny warned Draco and Luna in a whisper as they arrived at the TVP room. “Ron set her back up this morning and she hasn’t been speaking to anyone since.”

Sure enough, Hermione was sitting bolt upright in a corner, nose buried in a book, the lines of her shoulders radiating bad temper. It was a marked contrast to the rest of the group, who were sprawled across the floor in patches of sunlight, discussing schoolwork, demonstrating new spells, or simply basking. Draco looked from Hermione to Ron and Ray, who were chatting about Quidditch a few feet from Hermione while casting wary glances towards her, and a wicked idea blossomed in his mind.

“You be all right on your own, love?” he asked Luna.

“Of course. Starwing and I are going to go over the more difficult fingerings in that Easter duet we’re learning.” Luna kissed Draco’s cheek. “Don’t get yourself worse hurt than your mum and your aunt can heal.”

“Short of death itself, I don’t think that’s possible.” Draco made his way across the room, unslung his bag, and dropped it beside his two friends, who looked up with smiles as he seated himself.

“All I did was ask why she hasn’t been having so much for breakfast as usual lately,” Ron said plaintively when the typical male greeting rituals were finished. “She went off about my thinking she eats too much and she’s fat, and when I said I didn’t think that at all, she called me a liar and stamped off. Hasn’t said a word to me since.”

“Is it her time?” Ray made vague hand gestures to indicate the particular time he meant. “She gets touchy around then. Touchier than usual,” he added quickly as Ron and Draco both started to speak. “And sometimes she doesn’t want to eat.”

Ron shook his head. “It’s been going on for longer than that. A couple weeks at least. I don’t know what it is, but I’d really like to know when it’s going to stop.”

Hermione coughed. All three boys turned to look at her, but no part of her face was visible behind the blue leather binding of her book.

“False alarm,” said Ray, turning back to the group. “Thoughts, Malfoy?”

“Just one.” Draco leaned in and sketched out his plan in a few whispered words. Ron snorted at the first part of it, and both he and Ray had to repress snickers at the end.

“Sounds good to me.” Ray arched his arms over his head, cracking his knuckles by flexing his interlaced fingers backwards. “Let’s go.”

Moving cautiously, so as to make the least noise possible, the three turned their backs to Hermione and slid a few inches closer to her, out of easy arm’s reach but within it if certain measures were taken. Ron proved it a second or two later, as he lay down on his back and poked Hermione in the knee, sitting up again swiftly as the blue book closed with a snap.

“Who did that?” Hermione demanded, glaring around the room. “Come on, who was it?”

Draco assumed a highly innocent expression; it might be wasted on Hermione, who could see only the back of his head at the moment, but the rest of his friends were enjoying it immensely. Ginny and Starwing, in particular, were having trouble controlling their giggles, and his own Luna was watching Ron with a calm intensity Draco found somewhat disturbing. *It’s me you’re supposed to love, dear, not him...*

Luna’s eyes flicked to him for a second, and she winked once and blew him a kiss before returning to looking at Ron.

*Just so long as we’ve got that straight.*

Ray was the next one to move. As Hermione’s book opened once more and masked her face, he lay down and tapped a finger against the toe of her shoe, shooting upright in time to avoid being seen when the book came down again.

“This isn’t funny,” Hermione said severely, open snickering from several corners of the room contradicting her. “The next person who bothers me...” She left the threat open, instead going back to her book with an audible *hmph*.

*I do believe that’s my cue.*

Draco removed his arm and laid it in his lap. Moving deliberately to allow his friends to watch every step, he straightened the index finger, folded the others back into a loose fist, and hoisted the arm by its back end. A half-turn put him in position to reach out and tap the outstretched finger three times on the top of Hermione’s book.

*Explosion in three, two —*

“STOP IT!” Hermione shrieked, slamming her book shut. Draco yanked his arm back into his lap just in time to avoid it being seen. “What is *wrong* with you?”

“It wasn’t me!” Ray protested as his sister’s glare fell on him. “It was the one-armed man!”

Hermione switched her glare to Draco. Draco promptly pointed at Ron.

*Let's see if she notices...*

Blue eyes narrowed. With the flick of a finger, Hermione indicated that Draco should turn around.

*She did.*

Draco obediently scooted around, revealing that the finger pointing towards Ron was located on his prosthetic, which lay across his right shoulder, held in place by his right hand. Hermione's glare intensified. "You," she said, pointing her own finger at him. "Do you think you're funny?"

"Hmm." Draco rubbed the outstretched finger of the prosthetic against his head, as if scratching it in thought. "Yes."

Hermione maintained the glare for one more moment. Then her shoulders slumped, and she began to laugh. "You're right," she got out between giggles. "You're horrible—as are you!" she added to Ray. "But you are funny. In a horrible way, of course."

"What other way is there?" Draco asked, reattaching his arm.

Ron held out his hands to Hermione, who smiled and took them. "Feeling better now?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, I'm feeling much better." The smile broadened. "I might even be able to tell you what you wanted to know."

"Hmm?"

"You were saying you wanted to know when I'd stop feeling ill the way I have been." Hermione pulled a mock-chagrined face. "I can tell you that, but first I have to give you the bad news."

"O...kay," Ron said slowly. Draco looked from tall redhead to medium brunette, and a suspicion began to stir in his mind, one bolstered by Meghan's ecstatic grin and the secret smile Luna and Starwing were sharing. Ginny was covering her mouth, probably so Ron wouldn't see her laughing at him.

*How is it girls always seem to know these things and boys never do? Is it some kind of telepathy we don't have?*

"I'll stop being the way I am right now sometime late this fall," Hermione was saying now. "But then we're both going to change, and there won't be any going back from it." A fraction of her earlier glare returned. "And it's all your fault, too."

"Me?" Ron spluttered. "What did I do?"

Ginny choked. Harry thumped her on the back, now grinning openly. He'd clearly caught on. Neville, too, had an arm around Meghan and was watching Ron with a tolerant smile.

*Yeah, yeah, Draco grumbled mentally. Just because you're sure you'll be good at it doesn't mean*

*you can be all serene... oh wait, yes it does.*

Ray coughed, getting everyone's attention. "What you did, Weasley, is something I don't want to think about too closely," he announced. "Even if it is legal now that you're all married and the like."

"I suppose we really should have expected it before this," Luna put in. "Your family being the way they are."

Ron was looking more bewildered than ever. Hermione patted his hand. "Ron," she said kindly. "I'm pregnant."

---

*So once we woke Ron back up—no, I kid. He was amazed, he was happy, we all cheered for them, they kissed, we had the inevitable conversation about "wow, your kid's going to have an auntie less than a year older than he is, how crazy is that..." basically, there was much rejoicing.*

***You can't see it, but he's waving a little flag and saying "Yaaaay."***

*Quill thief. Remind me why I'm marrying you again?*

***Because you think I'm beautiful and you can't live without me?***

*That might just be it. In any case, Mum, we'll see you after Easter hols, since Mother and Lucius are expecting me home for them and it isn't terribly safe for us to make transit at the Manors without anyone else there on this end.*

***It won't do our story any harm for me to be seen at Malfoy Manor for a few days either. I wonder what we'll find to do, all alone in Draco's bedroom?***

*Look, I don't know what you're insinuating, but Ron's perfectly welcome to that title of "first father" as far as I'm concerned.*

***Spoilsport.***

*Every single time. Love you, Mum, and take care,*

***Until we meet again,***

*Draco*

***Luna***

---

Narcissa Malfoy rolled over with a sigh. Her usual facility of willing sleep over herself seemed to have deserted her lately.

*Not that I disturb anyone else with my restlessness, of course.*

And tonight, of all the absurd things, she kept fancying that she heard music...

*No, wait.* Narcissa sat up, shutting her eyes to concentrate harder on listening. *I do hear music. It is no fancy, no trick of my imagination. It is real.*

*But who would be playing music at such a time?* A glance at her bedside clock confirmed that it was well past midnight, into the wee hours of the morning. *I suppose it could be a wireless left on, which I have only just now heard...*

*Or it could be something else.*

She slid out of bed and reached for her dressing gown.

By the time Narcissa had reached the top of the main stairs, the singing had been replaced by quiet conversation, bolstering her instinctive feeling that the music came not from a carelessly abandoned device but from living hands and voices.

*And one of them, a voice I know well.*

“...do you get off to... morning?” Draco’s words, blurred by distance and the hush with which he spoke, drifted into her ears disjointedly. “...up after that crazy Saturday and everyone was... looked around, but the only place I thought... behind the great...”

“It’s a long story,” answered a girl’s voice clearly. “And it’s getting late. Why don’t we try that one duet now and talk about this tomorrow?”

Narcissa had to bite down on her fingers to keep from gasping in shock as she realized who this must be. *With all he has done to her already, what is Luna Lovegood doing in casual converse with my son? Unless he has Confunded her, or even placed her under Imperius—but that would not give her the ability to play music, unless she had it already—*

Music sounded now once more, the tinny tones of a piano hastily tuned by magic and dampened by inexpertly cast spells for silence. Narcissa slipped down several steps and seated herself, listening, as Luna began to sing.

---

Draco stood beside the piano, listening to his fiancée accompany herself in the first half of Mabel and Frederic’s love duet from the second act of *Pirates* .

*“Ah, leave me not to pine alone and desolate...” Not intending to, sweetheart, not intending to. And unlike dear Freddy, I haven’t got an overinflated sense of duty or a crazy indenture with a leap-day birthday to pull me back to the life I hate. As long as I can steer Harry to that last Horcrux, I’m home free...*

*Well, almost. I still want to know what Snape was doing out at Dumbledore's tomb the other day.*

Unbidden, Draco's mind replayed the strange scene. The night before leaving for home, he'd been walking by the lake, as he usually did in the evenings at his original Hogwarts (the otherworld's version had more interesting options for the hours between dinner and bed), when a cloaked figure, walking with purpose towards the white marble tomb, had caught his attention.

*I'm not certain it was Snape, but it was the right size and shape to be him, and after it did whatever it did at the tomb, it went straight to the Head's office and never came out. Wish I'd been able to get a little closer, to see what it was up to over there...*

Luna finished her final "Fa-la-la" and rolled the chord up the piano for Draco's entrance.

*I'll find out eventually. Right now, there is singing to be done.*

He took a breath and began. "Ah, must I leave thee here in endless night to dream..."

## **Be Careful**

### **74: How You Stop Speech**

“So let me get this straight.” Draco pointed at the leftmost column on the left-hand page of the large book lying open between him and Luna on the bed. “All this happens to him... and that makes today a *good* day?”

“Of course,” Luna said matter-of-factly. “You have to think of things in their bigger sense, not just as what happened to one person who agreed that it could.”

“I’ll let you handle that for me, thanks.” Draco checked his watch. “Right now, we have a wireless program to listen to. A very important program.”

Luna giggled. “Do you think anyone has guessed who Reflection is yet?” she asked as Draco pointed his wand at the wireless.

“Guessed from scratch, no. Mad-Eye,” Draco added to the wireless, which spun its dials madly for a second before finding its proper setting. “It won’t have helped that Thomas thinks he knows what Reflection looks like, and it isn’t anyone he’s ever met.”

“That was very quick thinking of you, to disguise yourself as Ray.” Luna shut the book and set it carefully on Draco’s desk before taking a seat on the bed.

Draco shrugged. “I needed a face I knew and no one else would. He was the first person to mind.”

“That doesn’t make it not quick thinking,” Luna said in tones of mild reproof, scooting over to make room for Draco beside her. “But you said no one had guessed from scratch. Who did you tell, then? Besides the one I know about already?”

“Well, I didn’t tell him exactly, but he had plenty of hints...”

---

Neville Longbottom leaned back in his heavy armchair and listened with half an ear to the test noises Lee Jordan was making over the wireless. Most of his mind was taken up with wondering about the cryptic message he had received via Galleon the day before.

*Listen to Potterwatch tell if we should worry F&G*

F&G, obviously, were Fred and George, but what would the Weasley twins want to know if they should worry about? Ron and Ginny were both out with Harry, as was Hermione; Luna had been seen as recently as February alive and well; and the rest of the DA was muddling through as best they could.

*With the ally I haven't dared tell anyone about. Though I'm starting to be surprised no one else has guessed...*

But people saw what they expected to see, Neville knew. He'd been as blind as anyone.

*Until the day I couldn't ignore it anymore.*

The memory of that eventful Hogsmeade visit could make him smile, Neville had found, when very little else could.

*Probably because that was the day I knew for sure we weren't alone. We hadn't been abandoned, no matter what it felt like.*

*Not to mention, we had friends we didn't even know about yet...*

In memory, he was running again after the fleeing Ginny, running as fast as he could but easily outdistanced by Harry, even under his Cloak, and Ron and Hermione in their Slytherin guises. Still, he had caught up soon enough to hear Alecto taunting Ginny, and Ginny's clear rejoinder.

*And I was in the perfect spot to see what no one else saw. To see the person who came pelting up, fired a Stunner around the corner into Madam Carrow's back, and turned into a little gray furry thing before anyone could notice him.*

*Or so he thought.*

Neville had spent the rest of that day looking back over the fall term in the light of his new knowledge. Everything fitted together so well that he was forced to conclude he hadn't been seeing things in that alleyway after all.

*So then I sent him a note—the same way he'd been sending them to us all this time, picked a fight in the hall and shoved it in his bag—asking him to meet me by the kitchens. He showed up, but he stayed in the shadows, never let me see his face. I asked him why, when I already knew who he was...*

---

“Plausible deniability,” the voice said briskly from the dark alcove in the kitchen hallway. “They already know who you are. They don't know me, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Which ‘they’?” Neville inquired, a faint bell of recognition beginning to ring in the back of his mind. *That Potterwatch broadcast the other night...*

“Any ‘they.’ Pick your side.” A pale-skinned hand waved negligently in the light for a moment before being withdrawn into the shadows again. “I’ve pissed both of them off pretty comprehensively, so the only thing left is for me to play one against the other.”

“But you’ve picked one to be really loyal to,” said Neville as the bell grew louder. “Otherwise we’d already have lost.”

“How do you figure?” In skepticism, the voice regained a bit of the drawl with which Neville had heard it through six and a half years of schooling, but still retained the crisp mannerisms with which it had been disguising itself. “I’m not that important—”

“You know where Harry is,” Neville interrupted. “Or where he was. If you’re not lying, and I don’t think you are.”

A long moment of silence. “Well, shite,” said Reflection ruefully at last. “And here I thought I’d fooled everybody.”

Neville shrugged. “It was just luck, really. Hearing *Potterwatch*, and then hearing you, and knowing you were on our side now.”

“Correction.” A finger wagged at him. “I’m on my own side. Allied with you, yes, but not ‘on your side.’”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“It’s a Slytherin thing. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Fine. But here’s a Gryffindor thing you’d better understand.” Neville tightened his fists, thinking of Ginny’s tired despair, of the bruises and cuts and broken fingers and sprained ankles of the other DA members, of the fear and bewilderment of the younger students who couldn’t understand why their school had turned into a nightmare. “You seem like a friend. We need a friend. So I’m going to trust you. But if you ever give us away, if you ever decide you’d do better allied with your old side again, I will kill you. Personally. Got that?”

A long, low whistle sounded. “What happened to that forgetful little kid with the toad I used to shoot Leg-Lockers at?”

“He grew up,” Neville said flatly. “Do you understand me?”

“Perfectly.” Reflection stepped forward into the fringe of the light, just enough for Neville to make out the features of his face. “Shake on it?”

Neville nodded. On a whim, he spit in his palm before holding it out. The other did the same

without hesitation, and their hands met, sealing the bargain.

---

*And he's lived up to it. He even warned us when some of the Slytherins started to get wind of Hagrid's "Support Harry Potter" party, and suggested that he should be the one to make the official report and lead the gang out to catch us, so he could get the credit for it but be able to warn us in time to get away...*

"Gooooood evening, Harry Potter fans! My name is River, and I'll be your host this evening, because this! Is! *Potterwatch* !"

Neville jerked out of his memories as Lee's voice boomed from the wireless. Hastily, he turned the volume down. *Gran'd never give me away, but the less she knows the better for everyone. Besides, it's nearly midnight...*

"Tonight, we have a most interesting tidbit from two of our most frequent contributors. Before I let them go to it, I want to remind everyone that unlike most of those whose voices you hear over our broadcast, these two do not personally come to our studio to be here with us. Instead, we receive Audio Recording Spells via owl. We have spoken with one person who got to meet them, but he could only name the one most of you can probably guess for yourselves. So it's no good asking us who they are—your guess is as good as ours!" Lee chuckled. "With that settled, I give you the lovely Radiance and Reflection the Potter Spotter!"

The coupling of the names brought Neville upright in his chair. *This must be what the twins wanted to know if they should worry about...*

"Good evening, *Potterwatch* listeners," said Reflection's voice, more cheerful than was usual even for him. "Those of you who've been listening for a while have probably noticed that the lovely Radiance and I always seem to appear here on *Potterwatch* in conjunction."

"As much as anyone can *appear* on a wireless broadcast, of course," added Luna.

"Of course." Reflection laughed. "I'm sure a few of you have been wondering about the reasoning behind it, and I'm delighted to finally be able to give you an answer."

"Which is also an announcement which I hope will make everyone who knows me happy." The tone of Luna's voice conjured her face up for Neville, smiling brightly in one of her rare moments of total focus. "It isn't final yet, because we haven't talked to my father—Daddy, if you're listening, we'll be along as soon as we can."

"But contingent on his approval," Reflection took back over, "and on circumstances of time and place coming together properly... the lovely Radiance and I are engaged to be married!"

"*What?*" Neville blurted, staring at the wireless. *Yes, I think we might need to worry about this one.*

“Luna,” he said over the sounds of celebration coming from the speaker, “have you gone insane?”

*What do you mean, gone? he could have sworn he heard her whisper. Besides, you trust him with your life, and the lives of the rest of the DA. Why not mine?*

“Good question.” Neville sat back down, wondering when he’d stood up. “But if he hurts you...”

*He won’t. This answer was immediate. He never would. Not that I think Harry will believe that.*

“No, he won’t, will he,” Neville muttered. “And guess who probably gets to tell him...”

---

“Hermione?” said Harry, watching his friend’s white face. “Is there something you want to tell us?”

“Wh-what?” Hermione shook her head jerkily. “Oh. No. No, there’s nothing. I was just surprised. It’s wonderful to hear Luna’s getting married, isn’t it?”

“I’d feel better if I knew who this Reflection is,” said Ron. “I don’t like the sound of him. How’s he know where we are all the time?”

“However he knows, if he was going to tell the Death Eaters where we are, don’t you think he’d have done it already?” Hermione shot back.

“Stop it!” snapped Ginny as Ron made to retort. “I want to hear what’s happening in the world, even if you don’t!”

*And I want to know what it is you’re hiding, Hermione. Or maybe who. Harry kept his eyes on Hermione as Potterwatch continued, Lee listing off people who’d been killed or hurt by Death Eaters, telling stories of daring resistance and thrilling escapes. Do you know who Reflection is? Are you the one telling him where we are? I can’t believe you’d do that...*

*But then, I can’t see any other way he could know as well as he does.*

Harry made up his mind. As soon as *Potterwatch* was over, he was going to ask Hermione point-blank, and keep on her until he got an answer. Ron would help, he was sure; they shared the feeling that Reflection might be dangerous, engaged to Luna or not.

*Luna isn’t Dark, but she doesn’t exactly have a normal person’s view of... well, anything. And we know she was kidnapped by Death Eaters. I wouldn’t put it past her to have fallen in love with one of them.*

*But at the same time, she and her friend—who’s probably the same person as Reflection, though she didn’t call him that—were the ones who sent us that box. He glanced at the sword of Gryffindor, leaning against the bottom of his and Ron’s bunks as usual. And how they knew we’d be in Godric’s Hollow to get it...*

Something jogged in his memory, and he reached behind him without looking. The smooth side of the white box met his fingers; he flipped back the lid and extracted Luna's letter, bringing it around quietly so as not to disturb his friends, who were listening to Lupin talking about the current state of the Order and the DA.

*Let me see... yes, here.* Harry traced the words he'd thought he remembered on the parchment: Luna's description of her unexpected friend. *"The Death Eaters destroyed his family and ruined his life, so he hates them as much as we do." Voldemort kills his own followers if they fail at things, and he might not kill their family too, but they wouldn't have an easy time of it. That's got to be who Reflection is, someone who lost a dad or mum for an honest mistake.*

Shoving away the feeling that he could go farther than that, could put a name and face to Luna's mysterious fiancé—he could always do it later if it turned out to be important—Harry turned his attention back to *Potterwatch*, where one of the twins was detailing the current excursions of Voldemort to the Continent.

*This is important. What's he doing abroad? I'd have thought he'd want to make sure he had power solidified here—*

*Unless—*

"I know what he's doing overseas," he said suddenly as the answer flooded into his mind. "It's the Elder Wand, he's still looking for it, I know it—"

"What?" said Ron, looking up from the wireless.

"Oh, Harry, don't—" began Hermione.

"You keep acting like it's not, but I *know* that's what he wants!" Harry was on his feet, pacing about the tent. "He thinks my wand's dangerous, so he wants a more powerful one to fight me with! I'm sure of it! Vol—"

"No!" shouted Ginny, swinging her hand up in a throwing motion. Harry reeled back, feeling rather like an invisible Quaffle had just hit him in the face.

*What was that?*

"Ginny," said Hermione in a small voice, "did you just—"

"Oops," said Ginny, staring at her hands.

"You can do wandless?" Ron said in tones of jealousy. "I never knew—"

The Sneakoscope on the table lit up and began to spin.

## **Be Careful**

### **75: What Hurts You Take**

Harry jumped to his feet, Ron only an instant behind; the taller boy planted a hand in the small of his sister's back and shoved her towards Harry. "Get her out," he hissed over the increasing whine of the Sneakoscope and the loud cracks of Apparition now sounding. "Get away from here, we'll follow!"

"Take this!" Hermione threw the sword of Gryffindor awkwardly across the tent, and Harry caught it by the hilt with the hand not clamped around Ginny's wrist. "Hurry!"

Shutting his eyes, Harry focused on the hilltop outside the tent. The trees there should give them cover, and it was nearby enough that he shouldn't make much noise getting there but, he hoped, behind the men he could now hear laughing.

"Come on out, kiddies," called a hoarse voice. "Run away from school, have you? Come nice and quiet, now, and—"

Harry rose onto his toes and pivoted, pulling Ginny and the sword along with him into the darkness of Apparition. His heartbeat sounded once in his ears, and then he was standing on the hill with Ginny leaning against him, her face pressed against his robes to stifle a cry of despair as four Snatchers with torches and wands dragged Ron and Hermione out of the tent in the clearing below. Hermione was sobbing quietly, cradling her wand hand against her chest, and made no move to fight when one of the Snatchers patted roughly at her sides as though seeking gold or valuables.

"She's hurt," Ginny breathed, looking at the red-spotted strip of cloth tied tightly around Hermione's wrist and across her palm. "I think she got the sword by the blade when she threw it."

Harry went to one knee and growled under his breath as he noticed tell-tale smears of dark liquid on the silver blade. A corner of his robes wiped it clean, and he pulled Ginny's wand from within his robes as he stood back up. "Hold still," he whispered. "I can't just carry it."

"And I can?" Ginny was facing away from him, fumbling in her pocket, but Harry chose to ignore it in favor of imagining exactly what he needed. A few careful waves with the wand, and a bit of concentration, just as Professor McGonagall had always said—

He let out a silent breath of satisfaction. A leather scabbard had formed across Ginny's back,

belted into place across the front of her robes and running from her right shoulder to her left hip. The sword fitted perfectly into it, and he was only just in time as Ginny turned abruptly.

“Here,” she mouthed, thrusting her DA Galleon at him. “Send a message to Fred and George. Tell them they need to get into hiding, warn the whole family. It won’t take those Snatchers too long to work out who Ron is.” Correctly interpreting the stricken look on his face—he’d never been good at the shortening of sentences needed to get messages across on the Galleons—she scowled. “Try *F&G take family into hiding now more later* .”

This fit with a bit of room to spare, and Harry sent it without delay, wondering in the back of his mind why neither of them was making a move towards helping Ron and Hermione. The Snatchers didn’t seem interested in hurting them at the moment, probably because the bounty on them was bigger if they were alive, but it seemed somehow disloyal to stand here and watch his friends be mistreated and do nothing.

As if reading his mind, Ginny put a hand on his wrist. “We have to wait,” she murmured, her voice covered by the laughter of two of the Snatchers at Hermione’s continued weeping. “It’s four to one, we’d never win. Maybe if I draw two of them off, you can Stun the two that are still here and let Ron and Hermione go, and then you and Ron can come and get rid of the other two—”

“Ang on a minute!” a voice rang out from below. “Look at this, in the *Prophet* ! Give us some light, bring that torch over!”

The Snatchers all crowded around the tattered newspaper, and Ron snapped his head up, scanning around the area. Harry waited until his friend was looking directly at him and Ginny before sending up a solitary white spark. Ron’s eyes brightened, and he started hitching himself around so that his hands, tied behind his back, could be cut loose without Harry and Ginny having to move and give their position away—

“Well, well,” said a voice Harry knew, and the Snatchers broke up to reveal the leering, hair-covered face of Fenrir Greyback. He had the *Daily Prophet* clutched in one yellow-taloned hand, and was peering from it to Hermione. “Looks like we may have caught ourselves a little prize. What do you say, girly? You ‘Hermione Granger, Mudblood thought to be traveling with Harry Potter’?”

“No!” Hermione shook her head frantically, tears streaking her cheeks and her voice shaking in pain and terror. “No, that isn’t me, that’s not my name!”

“You sure?” Greyback shook the newspaper at her. “You wouldn’t want to find out what happens to people who lie to me, now—”

Ron launched himself at the werewolf, shouting in inarticulate rage. Greyback turned and casually kicked him in the face, and Ginny sucked in a breath as her brother doubled over. Harry clenched his hand around Ginny’s wand, wanting nothing more than to rush down the slope to rescue his friends, but it would only get him caught too, it wouldn’t help, he had to remember that, it wouldn’t help—

*Standing here outside the gates wouldn't help, he would have to take to the air—the person he wanted would be found up high, at the top of the tallest tower—*

“Harry!”

Ginny's hand was over his mouth, he was flat on his back in the underbrush, the wand was gone. “You almost shouted,” she hissed in his ear. “I practically had to knock you down, what's *wrong* with you?”

“Scar,” Harry muttered as she took her hand away. Remembering to keep his voice down was no trouble, not when he felt that his head would crack open with the pain if he spoke above the tone he was using now. “He's somewhere important—he thinks he's close—”

“Try and fight it.” Ginny pressed his hand, and the pain receded a little. “We have to go. They're not quite sure Hermione is Hermione, but they're going to take her and Ron to the Malfoys' anyway, they figure someone there ought to know.”

“They figure right.” Harry clenched his teeth and pushed himself to his feet, accepting the wand Ginny pressed back into his hand. “They're neither of them disguised, Draco Malfoy would know them in an instant, and if he's not there his dad wouldn't have much trouble either. Even his mum might do, she was in the Top Box with us at the World Cup, and Ron said they'd all seen him looking like Hermione when Malfoy caught him back in October—” Turning, he caught an odd expression on Ginny's face. “What?”

“I need you to send another message.” Ginny's forehead was furrowed, and she had her lower lip between her teeth. “Start it with *LL* . Then put *R&H caught being taken to Malfoys help?* End it with a question mark and sign it *GW* . Quick, we don't want to be too far behind them.”

Harry did as he was told, storing the cryptic words and letters in the back of his mind for later examination. He had enough troubles to be going on with at this point.

*Ron may have got away from the Death Eaters once already, but that just means they'll have made it harder to do this time.*

Concentrating, through the pain in his scar, on arriving somewhere hidden near Malfoy Manor, he pulled Ginny close and Disapparated.

---

Bellatrix looked up from her scroll as laughter and shouts sounded from the front hallway of the manor house. “Bring them in,” her sister's voice rose over the din. “I will call my son, he is upstairs—”

“Who's upstairs?” Draco's voice cut in. “Ahhhhh.” The sigh was mingled gloating and anticipation. “Look who's come back to see us again. And she's brought a friend along! Hullo, Weasley, spattergroit all better now?”

Increasing her pace, Bella entered the front hall in time to see one of Arthur Weasley's parcel of gawky, ginger-haired brats wrestle free of the two Snatchers holding him and snarl an invitation to do something unnatural to himself at her nephew, who stood on the stairs looking down on the scene. She strode over to the blood traitor and slapped him hard enough to knock him to the ground, taking care to jostle his recently broken nose. The Mudblood girl, nursing a bandaged hand, cried out faintly in protest, but Greyback shook her where he grasped her shoulders and she fell silent.

Draco bounded down the rest of the stairs and hauled the other boy to his feet, grinning at Bella. "Ah, now, auntie, you know what the Dark Lord said about proper protocol. We'll start with the Mudblood and save the blood-traitor for later." He looked thoughtful for a second. "Did that rhyme? I think that rhymed."

Bella laughed. "A proper pureblood should be master of all talents," she said, patting Draco's shoulder. "Go on, put that one away for now. We'll get the Mudblood to tell us where Potter's got to." She glanced back at the girl, relishing the prospect of her screams. "See just how painful that hand really is."

"No!" The Weasley boy tried to pull free, but Draco had a good grip on the ropes. "Not her hand, you can't, it'll kill her!"

"Melodrama," said Draco with a disdainful sniff. "Come on, Weasley, I'm sure you're anxious to see how little Lovegood's been doing. You can swap stories while you're waiting your turn." He yanked Weasley towards the stairs, forcing the taller boy to follow or fall and be dragged. "Don't start without me, now!" he added over his shoulder. "I'll only be a minute—come on, Weasley, remember we've got no need to keep your balls intact, there's certainly enough of your brothers around to keep the bloodline going without you..."

His chattering died away as he rounded the corner on the first floor, Weasley tagging helplessly behind, and Bella turned her attention to the brown-haired girl shivering in Greyback's hold. "I almost hope you survive questioning," she said softly, approaching step by step and enjoying the fear mounting in the brown eyes as she came. "We can have your boyfriend back down here, and most likely Potter too by then, so they can watch what happens to you."

Carelessly, as though by accident, she let her gaze slide from Granger's face to Greyback's. The werewolf snickered and lowered his face to press it against the bushy hair, sniffing with every evidence of pleasure, then sliding it down to the girl's ear. "Oh, yes," he breathed, his tongue darting out to touch her skin. "Little Malfoy won't be taking this one away from me, no, he won't..."

Granger whimpered as Greyback caught the top curve of her ear between his teeth. "Wait your turn," Bella directed sharply. Greyback growled under his breath, but opened his mouth and straightened up. Snickers came from the other three Snatchers who had been out with him, and Bella smiled to see Greyback discomfited.

"I can't tell you anything," Granger said in a thread of a voice, her eyes half-shut as though the

lights in the hall were too bright for her. “Harry left us. I don’t know where he is. You can torture me all you want and I still won’t know.”

“No idea at all?” Bella closed the distance between them and pulled the girl’s head up by her hair, eliciting a fresh gasp of pain from her. “Not even a guess where he might’ve gone? From his best friend in the world?”

“I told you I don’t know!” Granger cried out. “He just went—he didn’t say where—please—*please*—”

Swift footsteps beside her. “Auntie, I’m disappointed in you,” said Draco in his most coaxing tone. “Is that any way to behave to a guest?”

Bella blinked at her nephew, letting go Granger’s hair in her astonishment. Draco dropped her a broad wink, then turned to Greyback and snapped his fingers, flicking his left hand back in a commanding motion. The werewolf’s nostrils flared, and he looked as though he were about to challenge the order, but Draco had his wand trained between the bloodshot eyes before Greyback could speak. “Go on,” he said in a voice that managed to fill all available space while remaining soft. “Give me an excuse.”

Greyback snarled, but released Granger, who sagged in place. Draco moved quickly to catch her and lower her to the floor, seemingly all solicitude. “What happened to that hand?” he asked in syrupy tones. “Cut it on something? Let me see.” He pursed his lips and made noises of disapproval at the swollen, green-tinged palm Granger displayed. “Oh, that looks bad. You’ll never be able to concentrate on everything we need to ask you with this little lot in the way.” His tone turned suddenly chill. “Why don’t I take care of it for you? Permanently?”

Bella was peripherally aware of Lucius’ arrival behind her, of Cissy coming forward from her place at the door, but her attention was riveted on Draco’s wand as it swept down. A muttered two-word incantation, and Granger gasped as a gout of flame shot from the wand’s tip, engulfing her hand and the carpet beneath it. A second incantation, and the flame was gone, vanished as though it had never been.

Just like the right hand of Hermione Granger.

“There,” said Draco in satisfaction. “That’s *much* better.” He scrambled to his feet, caught the girl by the left shoulder, and hoisted her up after him. “Now, let’s talk about Harry Potter...”

## Be Careful

### 76: What Truth You Hear

Lucius found it hard to keep a foolish grin off his face as his son escorted Hermione Granger into the front room with mockingly precise courtesy. He couldn't remember when he'd been prouder of Draco, not even when the boy had shown early aptitude for flying or brought home glowing reports from his teachers.

*Less than a year ago, I despaired of him. I thought he would never fulfill the potential I had once seen. And look at him now...*

"Here, have a seat." Draco whisked one of the couches which lined the walls into the center of the room and shoved Granger down onto it. "Make yourself... comfortable." His wand twitched towards the raw, red flesh covering the end of Granger's right wrist.

The Mudblood girl shrieked and clutched her arm to her. "Why are you doing this?" she wailed. "I've already told you I don't know where Harry is!"

"Oh, I know you have. But you could be lying. Though you might consider that beneath your precious Gryffindor honor." Draco pulled up a chair for himself and straddled it, leaning on the back to consider Granger with a lazy smile. "Or it's always possible Weasley knows, even if you don't. My room isn't soundproofed... not from the outside, anyway. He can hear everything that's happening down here. So I think I'll let him listen to us for a while, and give my precious Loony a chance to tell him what she's..." He swiveled his hips, making Granger shudder and turn aside. "...experienced. Who knows? He might decide to speak up after all."

"Ron doesn't know any more than I do." Granger pushed herself upright, her breath coming in short gasps but her voice determined. "You won't get anything from either of us. And Harry knows better than to come here after us."

Draco scoffed. "Now that I greatly doubt. Harry Potter, the Chosen One, who goes running off to save anyone who's ever caught his fancy, not try to help his two best friends in the world? Not that he'll succeed. Anyone who tries to Apparate in or out of these grounds gets automatically splinched, right here." He jabbed a hand against his breastbone. "And the only way past the wards at the boundaries is to be Marked or a Malfoy, or be let past by someone who is."

---

"We have to help them," Harry muttered, staring through the trees at the forbidding walls

surrounding Malfoy Manor. “We have to do something.” He held tightly to his fear for Ron and Hermione, to the unseen presence of Ginny by his side, to all the things that made him Harry Potter and not Lord Voldemort, flying around a fortress-like building far away, seeking a particular window and a particular man...

“We have to get in first,” Ginny answered, keeping her voice as low as Harry had. “And I don’t like the look of those gates.”

“Nor do I, but we can’t just stand here—” A flutter above his head caught Harry’s eye, and he looked up. His heart contracted at the sight of the snowy owl perched on a branch. *Hedwig, I’m sorry, you deserved so much better than me—*

The owl preened her breast feathers for a second, then dropped from the tree and silently exploded. Harry heard Ginny gasp, and barely stopped himself from doing the same.

“Thank you for not getting caught too,” said Luna Lovegood, a smile flashing across her face. “It’ll make everything much easier. Come on, I think I can let you in.”

---

Lucius frowned, unsure he liked the Mudblood knowing so much about Malfoy Manor’s security. *But why should I worry? She is our prisoner...*

“I got away from you once already, didn’t I?” said Granger, her lips twitching into the briefest of smiles. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll do it again?”

*And that is why I should worry. For her to be so confident, she must have something hidden on her person, or some skill she has learned that will enable her to escape once more. We must neutralize her immediately!*

Lucius started forward to take control of the interrogation, but Draco held up a hand, his eyes still fixed on the girl. “No,” he said thoughtfully. “No, I don’t believe I am. Not when I know how you did it that first time.” He chuckled, the sound echoing through his next words. “Or so I’ll tell you, at any rate.”

“So you’ll tell me?” Granger echoed, her face showing the same bewilderment Lucius knew his own harbored, as well as the rest of the audience—Narcissa, Bellatrix, Greyback, and the other three Snatchers who had brought the two fugitives in. “But you’ve just told me...”

Draco plucked his wand from his pocket with a sigh. “You’re such a Muggle sometimes, Granger,” he said, twirling it between two fingers. “Ever heard of Memory Charms? Once I’ve finished telling you all about what I’ve got planned for you, I’ll wipe it right out of your frizzy little head and you’ll never know the difference.” His smile reappeared, and he got up from the chair and pushed it aside, padding silently in his bare feet around the couch where Granger sat, watching him warily. “But I want you to know about it first. And not just you.” He glanced up at the ceiling, his smile now a predator’s grin. “Weasley should hear what’s going to happen to the love of his life, don’t you think?”

As though in response, there was a thump from the corridor. Lucius half-turned to investigate, but stopped before he had gone more than a step. *If it were Weasley escaping his captivity, or Potter rushing to the rescue, we would already know it. Wormtail has tripped and fallen, or dropped something he was carrying, and he can deal with the aftermath himself. I will watch every second of my son's triumph over this upstart Mudblood brat, and enjoy it to the fullest.*

---

The man known even to himself as Wormtail hurried through the hallways of Malfoy Manor, hoping Amycus Carrow didn't simply "forget" to tell Snape he was wanted here, and then later claim he'd never received the message to begin with.

*It isn't disloyalty, he salved his conscience. The Dark Lord would want Snape to know how well the war is going, how thorough his revenge on James Potter is finally going to be. That's the only reason I Flooed the school, the only reason at all.*

He ran into the front hallway and froze with shock. It lasted only an instant, but it was enough. The tall, red-haired boy who'd just come through the front door leapt at him, catching him around the throat, and they went down together.

The voices from the side room cut off abruptly as they rolled on the floor, grappling at each other's faces and arms, the boy (he *couldn't* let himself use the name, Wormtail knew, not even in his thoughts, or he'd be lost) snatching at the wand tucked into Wormtail's pocket, Wormtail squirming ever more frantically away, and their rasping breaths the only sound left in the world...

---

"What's going to happen to me?" Granger rolled her eyes. "You'll hurt me. I'll tell you I don't know where Harry is. You'll hurt me more. I'll tell you again I don't know where Harry is. Ron will tell you the same, if you bother to ask him. When you're finally convinced I'm telling the truth, you'll either kill me yourself or hand me over to *that* ." Her glare stabbed at Greyback, who licked his lips and sniggered. "Either way, I end up dead."

"Is that really what you think of me?" Draco pressed his hands to his chest, a look of shock on his face. "That I'd kill you? How... inartistic. Anyone can kill Mudbloods. Even Scabior there's done for one of them." He nodded towards a Snatcher. "Haven't you, man? Little Gryffindor girlie, about fourteen, gingery blonde?"

Scabior nodded eagerly, beaming. "Didn't know you'd 'eard of that," he said. "Cor, but she screamed pretty."

"Natalie," Granger breathed. "Natalie Macdonald."

Draco wiped an imagined smudge from his wand with the sleeve of his robes. "Did you know her, then?" he asked in an unconcerned tone.

Granger sucked air through her teeth and did not reply.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Draco pulled a long face. “So sorry for your loss.”

---

“Drat,” said Luna, pressing her hands against the wall. “I was wrong. I can’t open them.”

“Open what?” said Ginny, watching her friend examine the stone blocks. “The walls?”

“No, the wards in the walls. If they were just walls, we could knock them down. But they’re filled with magic, because magical people have lived here for so many years. They know their masters and obey them, and they know me a little bit, enough to let me out, but not enough to let me back in with you.” Luna laid her forehead against the wall as well. “They’re so smart. It’s almost like they’re alive.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Harry asked, repressing his urge to kick at the thing separating him from his friends. It would only hurt his foot. “Kill them?”

Both girls turned to stare at him. It was Ginny who spoke first. “Can we?”

“Maybe.” Luna cocked her head as if listening to something. “Yes.”

“I was joking,” Harry protested feebly. “We can’t actually—”

“If it’s going to get us in there to rescue Ron and Hermione?” Ginny broke in. “Yes, we can. Where’s a weak point, Luna?”

---

Draco returned to his pacing, returning Granger’s stare of hatred with one of tolerant amusement. “As I was saying, anyone can just *kill* Mudbloods. Two words, one spell, and you’ve got a dead body on your hands. But what good is that? No, I want to try something a little different with you, Hermione.” His voice caressed the name, making Granger shiver. “That’s right, I know your given name. It’s what set me thinking. Awfully strange thing for a pair of Muggle tooth-bashers to name their one and only daughter, isn’t it?”

“My father loves Shakespeare,” Granger said, her voice beginning to tremble. “He named me for the queen in *The Winter’s Tale* .”

“So he says, I’m sure.” Draco leaned on the back of the couch, forcing the girl to crane her neck awkwardly to look up at him. “And how do your parents explain your magic? This sudden, stunning power that no one else in your family ever had before?”

“They don’t try to explain it.” Granger dug her fingers into the fabric of the couch. “They just accept it, as part of who I am.”

“So they say.” Draco’s gaze flickered up to Lucius. Granger’s followed. “Father used to shame me by you, did you know that?” His voice shifted into the precise tones Lucius used himself, and Lucius nearly touched his own throat to be sure he wasn’t speaking. “My son, the heir to the

House of Malfoy, outdone by a Mudblood. Disgusting. Why couldn't she have been born my daughter, and you to the Muggles?"

Granger wrinkled her nose, as though Draco smelled bad. "I wouldn't wish you on my parents," she said. "Not for all the gold in Gringotts."

"Touché," said Draco with a grin, using his own voice. "But that isn't what I'm getting at, Hermione." Again the coaxing tone in the name, making it sound like a song. "Or haven't you worked it out yet? You with your clever, clever mind?"

Slowly, Granger shook her head.

"No? What a shame. Let me try again. Your birthday's 19 September, isn't it?" Draco waited only long enough for Granger's startled nod before continuing. "And mine is 5 June. Count with me..." He held up his hands, loosely fisted, raising his fingers as he spoke. "October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May, June." Hands with only the thumb of the left still tucked under waggled at Granger. "A week or two shy of the full nine, but I was a sickly baby. Or that's what I'll give you to understand, once I have you properly Obliviated and locked away."

The fullness of his son's plan made itself clear to Lucius suddenly, and he could not repress a soft sigh of pleasure. *Twisted and subtle. What a marvelous child I have raised.*

"Yes, you're getting it now." Draco's smile brightened as Granger pressed the knuckles of her remaining hand to her mouth, stifling a cry. "I won't *tell* you anything, you see. I'll simply be your protector, your shield against the horrors befalling your dear friends, until you come to trust me. Then I'll start letting you find things out, a bit at a time, until you're quite sure of your conclusion." He leaned over her, twirling a strand of brown hair possessively about his finger. "I've always wanted a sister. I think you'll do nicely."

## Be Careful

### 77: Why You Cast Spells

“Your *sister*?” Granger pulled her head away from Draco’s hand. “I’d never believe that—”

“No, you will,” Draco interrupted, smiling benevolently down at the girl. “You won’t want to, not at first, but you’ll come around to it in the end. And then we can set about making it a reality.”

Lucius glanced at Narcissa, who was watching the scene in front of them as devotedly as though her life depended on it. Bellatrix stood near the door, laughing softly, and Greyback paced warily on the opposite side of the room, near the other three Snatchers, who seemed puzzled by what Draco was doing.

I admit it puzzles me as well, to some extent. Taunting the girl by making her believe she is what she can never be, then crushing her hopes with the truth, makes excellent sense. But what is this about making it reality?

“What are you talking about?” Granger asked, unconsciously repeating Lucius’ thoughts. “I’m not your sister. You can’t change that, any more than you can change my blood.”

“Ah, but I can, dear Hermione.” Draco lifted a tendril of the girl’s hair and batted it playfully across her chin. “Allow me to explain. It makes use of a little bit of Dark magic...”

---

“I can’t.” Harry shook his head, backing away from Luna and Ginny. “Luna, no, I can’t do this, there’s got to be another way!”

“There is none.” Luna’s voice was firm and cool, and her eyes had lost their usual dreaminess, focusing on him until Harry felt skewered by the intensity of her gaze. “The grounds are warded against Apparition, so the only way for Ron and Hermione to get out is to cross the boundaries. And the only way they can cross the boundaries is if we destroy them.” She spread her hands on the wall, making a rough circle. “Here.”

“Destroy them’s one thing.” Harry gripped Ginny’s wand as though it could save him. “You’re talking like I’d have to use—”

His scar seared, his vision blurred, the clearing and the girls vanished—

*He stood in a barren room, a wrinkled old man grinning toothlessly at him from a thin bed, speaking to him. "...pointless. I never had it."*

*"You lie!"*

The words burst from Voldemort's mouth in a burst of rage, shocking Harry back into his own body. Ginny was several steps closer to him, watching him like a kneazle at a gnomehole. "It's him, isn't it?" she breathed. "It's You-Know-Who. You can feel him. Hear him."

Harry gave the slightest of nods, looking over Ginny's shoulder at Luna, who seemed intent on some vision between her curved hands. "I can't do this, Ginny," he said in a low tone, aware the words weren't quite right but not sure how to fix them. "I can't use that spell. If I do... what difference is there left, between him and me? What's stopping me from becoming him?"

---

Ron shoved and kicked at Wormtail, fighting not only the man but the urges of the form in which he'd got himself down from the high window to the front door of Malfoy Manor, the urges that wanted him to bite and tear and kill this little vermin. Wormtail seemed to be able to sense the feeling, since his breath came in short gasps and his eyes were glazed with fear.

*Or is that something else?*

"You little bastard," Ron hissed, making another snatch for the wand and being deflected. "I fed you, I cared about you, I quit talking to Hermione when I thought you were dead—" He caught a flicker of guilt deep in the staring eyes and pressed harder. "That's right, Hermione, you remember her. You called her a sweet girl, you begged her to help you. And you know where she is right now. If she dies and I could've saved her, it'll be your fault!"

Wormtail made a whimpering noise in his throat, but it never got as far as words.

"And what about Harry?" Ron elbowed the Death Eater in the side, and Wormtail doubled up, still guarding his wand but with desperation clear on his face now. "Harry let you live, and what did you do? You went and brought your Master back from the dead, and now his mates are going to kill us! Hell of a way to pay him back, *Wormy!* "

A sound like a sob burst from Wormtail, and his hand twitched away from his wand pocket for one instant. Ron pounced on the opportunity, yanking the wand free, and spun away from Wormtail in the same movement, running across the hall as silently as he'd ever sneaked past his parents' bedroom at midnight, praying he wasn't too late.

---

"You see, there is one way to make a Mudblood into a pureblood." Draco seated himself on the arm of the couch, still toying with the strands of the Granger girl's hair. "It requires three things. First, a pureblood family ready to adopt its newest member—that's us, of course." He shot Lucius a sharp look. "After all, it's not so much adoption as it is re-adoption. Or so you'll think when it happens."

*I believe I do remember this, from my N.E.W.T. studies many years ago. Lucius gave his son the smallest of nods, willing him to go on. Though whether or not he can convince her to supply the other requirements I seem to recall...*

“Second is a Mudblood who wants to reject everything Muggle, everything and everyone, and is willing to swear to that with the strongest and most binding magical oath there is.” Draco laid his fingers delicately against Granger’s stump, making her gasp and shiver. “We’ll find some way for you to take the Vow, never fear. And once you’ve done that, we can get on with finding the third necessity.”

“What’s that?” Granger whispered, her eyes fixed on Draco, as though she had already learned to worship him as he was claiming she would.

“Your Muggle relatives.” Draco’s voice lost its coaxing edge and became hard, triumphant. “You’ll tell us where they are, Hermione. More than that, you’ll come with us to lure them out of hiding. Once we have them, you’ll tell them what you know, what I’ve taught you. You’ll laugh at their denials and their proclamations of love; you’ll tell them you’ve found people who love you better than they ever could. And then you’ll take your wand. You’ll point it at each of them in turn. And of your own free will, without help or provocation from anyone...”

---

“Harry, at the risk of being obvious, it’s a *wall* .” Ginny pointed firmly at the object in question. “And it’s standing between you and your two best friends in the world.”

“But the Killing Curse—” Harry began.

Ginny whirled and glared full into his face. “Harry Potter, you are an idiot,” she snapped. “*You-Know-Who would let them die in there!* He doesn’t have *friends* , he has people he uses when they’re convenient, the same way he used me! He’d have packed up the tent and Disapparated somewhere else and been glad to be rid of the ‘baggage!’” She spit the word, as though it left a foul taste in her mouth. “And you are standing here, trying to figure out some way to get them out of there. *That* is the difference you were looking for. You are *you* , Harry, no matter what spells you use—especially on a wall, and one that wants to die in any case!”

The word he’d been looking for earlier came to Harry. “I still can’t do it...” he began.

Ginny’s eyes narrowed.

“Alone,” Harry finished, reaching for her hand. “I can’t do it alone. Not this.”

“All right, then. I’ll start.” Ginny squeezed his fingers once, then reached around and drew the sword in a silver flash. “Where, Luna?”

“Here.” Luna tapped a spot on the stones. “Just here.”

Ginny braced her feet and drove the sword of Gryffindor into the wall between two stones. The

ground shuddered at the impact, but steadied again in the next instant. “Did that do anything?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes.” A brisk nod from Luna. “The wards are much weaker now. One good strike will collapse them.” Blue-gray eyes turned to Harry. “Are you ready?”

---

Ron pressed himself against the side of the doorframe, listening to the voices within, getting his breathing under control. He hadn’t come too late; if anything, he was too early. Still, no one had seen him, he had a wand, he was in position, and most of all, Hermione was alive—

“No!” It was her voice, disbelieving and horrified, and Ron closed his free hand tightly around the wood on the wall. He couldn’t just run in there, it would be suicide, he had to wait for the diversion, wait and hope it worked the way he’d been told it would...

He ignored the strange sounds behind him—Wormtail was disarmed and beaten, and even if he transformed, what could a rat do? Bite him on the ankle?

So it was that no one saw the look of panic on Wormtail’s face as his silver hand moved on its own, creeping upward towards his throat. No one heard his struggles as his shining gift from his master, the reward he had been given for bringing Voldemort back to life, choked the breath from his body. No one looked on and remembered the words of the Dark Lord at the moment of that giving.

*“May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail...”*

Peter Pettigrew died as he had lived, alone and friendless, a traitor to the cause he openly espoused. Still, with him into the darkness went the knowledge that at the last, he had done one thing right. Whether it would be enough to balance what he’d done wrong, he didn’t know. But it was all he had to offer.

---

“Yes.” Draco beamed down at Granger. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“No! It’s horrible!” Granger shoved herself forward off the couch and got to her feet, her tones modulating from fear into anger. “Kill my own parents? Take *yours*?”

The word was imbued with disgust, and Lucius could not repress a slight sniff—as though he could be compared in any way with some dog of a Muggle, much less to his own detriment!

“Why would you believe I’d do any such thing?” Granger demanded, glaring at Draco in hatred all the worse for being powerless.

“Because, my beautiful sister,” Draco said lazily, “you won’t have a choice.” He leaned back on the arm of the couch, letting his bare toes trail against the floor. “By the time I’m through with you, you’ll believe everything I do, as fervently as you believe what you do now. You’ll kneel at

the Dark Lord's feet beside me, and kiss his robes just after I do.”

*And speaking of him...* Lucius weighed the possibilities and made a decision. If Granger did not break in the next few moments, Weasley surely would, or Potter would come of his own accord. Still listening to his son, he pulled back his left sleeve.

“Oh, you'll raise your wand to those Muggle tooth-pullers all right,” Draco murmured, his eyes half-shut as though he were already savoring the sight. “You'll even smile when you say those two little magic words...”

---

Harry closed his own eyes against another stab of pain from his scar. The vision of the tower room, the old man laughing, Voldemort's thwarted fury, tried to take him over, but the touch of Ginny's skin against his as she slipped back from the wall to stand beside him gave him the focus he needed to stay himself.

His friends were in trouble. It was time to help them.

“Yes,” he answered Luna, and raised his wand on high, feeling from afar Voldemort doing the same. Together they swept them down, and together they shouted the same two words, as a high, clear scream pierced the night and made the ground tremble beneath their feet once again.

*“Avada Kedavra! ”*

## Be Careful 78: How You Attack

“Oh, you’ll raise your wand to those Muggle tooth-pullers all right,” Malfoy’s voice echoed lazily into the hall, making Ron grit his teeth against his anger. “You’ll even smile when you say those two little magic words...”

Hermione screamed. Simultaneously, the floor began to shake.

Ron threw a Disillusionment Charm over himself and darted into the room, wand at the ready.

Hermione stood in the center of the room, her face twisted in fury, shrieking in rage and denial of Malfoy’s words. Malfoy himself lay sprawled beside an ornate couch, which was now hovering nearly a foot above the carpet, as was the rest of the furniture in the room; his parents and his aunt were trying to aim their wands at Hermione, but the heaving floor beneath them was throwing them off. Greyback and his fellow Snatchers seemed intent on finding an exit as quickly as possible.

*Not past me, you don’t.* Ron took aim at one of them and focused his whole mind on the word *Stupefy!* The Snatcher jerked as in surprise, then collapsed.

Hermione whirled to face Bellatrix. “This is for Sirius!” she shouted. “And for pulling my hair!” Her arms shot forward, as though she were throwing a Quaffle, and the couch beside Malfoy flew straight at the mad witch and slammed her into the wall.

*Partway through it, even.* Ron grinned to himself and Stunned another of the Snatchers nonverbally. *Go Hermione!*

“This is for Natalie Macdonald!” Hermione wheeled to face a third Snatcher, the only one besides Greyback still upright, and made a yanking motion with her left hand as though pulling a lever. The wall beside the startled Snatcher promptly caved in on him.

*I don’t know how she’s doing this, but it’s awesome.* Ron tripped Narcissa Malfoy as she started to run forward at Hermione, apparently thinking to overpower her bodily. *Now as long as she can keep it up...*

Hermione turned on Greyback, her eyes burning feverishly. “This is for Bill and Remus!” Two armchairs rose up this time, pinning the feral werewolf between them and hoisting him into the

air. One of them flung him against the bricks of the fireplace, and the second caught him as he was struggling to his feet, throwing him into the fire itself. His howl of anguish widened Ron's grin considerably.

"And this." Hermione stared down at Draco Malfoy, who seemed pinned to the floor by her gaze, unable to move. Ron caught Lucius with an Impediment Jinx as the older Death Eater managed to fumble out his wand. "This is for me."

She brought her fist down like the hammer of the gods. Draco screamed as the floor opened under him and he vanished from sight, followed by a rain of rubble from the ceiling above. The chandelier creaked, its chain swaying ominously—

As was Hermione, her eyes starting to roll back in her head.

*I think that wraps it up for us.* Ron stumbled forward and caught his girlfriend in his arms as she fell limply, then threw a Shield Charm around them in the nick of time. The chandelier dropped, shattering on the solid dome of Ron's spell, and Narcissa, who had regained her feet only an instant before, threw her arms up to ward flying glass away from her face. Lucius wrenched himself free of the Impediment Jinx just in time to turn away.

*Means neither of them is looking at us.*

*Suits me fine.*

Ron scooped Hermione into his grasp, cast a hasty Featherlight Charm on her, and bolted for the door. The floor, he noticed as he ran, seemed to be stabilizing under his feet, though the house as a whole was shaking harder than ever. He stuck it in the back of his mind for later, concentrating for now on running.

*I hope they got those wards down...*

The front door flew open before him, and the hot trickle down his neck of the Disillusionment being removed vanished in the vast tide of relief as Harry, Ginny, and Luna burst in, Harry and Luna with their wands, Ginny with the sword of Gryffindor. "You all right?" Harry bellowed.

"Fine, let's go!" Ron shouted back, already halfway to the door. "Just show me where!"

His friends and sister flanked him as he ran across the grounds, hearing behind him the ear-destroying sounds of a house collapsing onto itself. Luna was out in front, her wand casting a silvery light to show them the way; Ginny, the sword now sheathed, matched his pace beside him, her hand ready beside his arm in case he should stumble; Harry had fallen behind, obviously watching for any last-minute attacks from Death Eaters, and possibly hoping for them too, Ron thought with a flicker of humor...

But no attack came, and a few endless moments later, Harry was boosting him up and over the crumbled bit of stone wall, Ginny steadying him from the side. Luna's wand was still lit, but her

attention was elsewhere, back the way they'd come. Ron turned, once his feet were back on solid ground, to have a look.

Malfoy Manor was all but gone. Only the ground floor remained, and even that was starting to fall, the outer portions of the house first. Ron felt a fierce glow of satisfaction, which grew all the hotter as Hermione shifted restlessly against his chest, apparently uncomfortable against the amulet he was still wearing.

*See, that's what you get for being arrogant bullying bastards...*

"We should go," said Harry, breaking Ron out of his momentary trance. "Not back to the tent, I don't think."

"Bill and Fleur's," Ron said immediately, his mind combining his own refuge after an earlier escape from this same place with what Hermione had shouted at Greyback. "Hermione's going to need a Healer."

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked. "Just that cut from the sword, or something else?"

Ron stared at his sister for an instant, then realized Hermione's sleeve had fallen down over her wrist, making her injury less apparent. Gently, he reached down and pulled it back. "That," he said. Ginny gasped, and Luna made a soft crooning sound in her throat.

"Her wand hand," said Harry, shooting a poisonous glance back at the house. "Was it Bellatrix?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there, I think it was Malfoy, Draco Malfoy I mean, but Harry, there's something you ought to know—"

"Why don't we get out of here first and talk later?" Ginny interrupted. "Harry, can you Side-Along two?"

Harry nodded, his eyes lingering for one more second on Hermione's missing hand before he held out his own to Luna. Clearly he wasn't about to forget what had been done here tonight.

*And he might not believe me when I tell him why.* Ron imagined the little, shell-walled cottage by the sea where his oldest brother now lived and turned in place, cradling Hermione close to him. *I know I'd find it hard to believe if it were the other way around.*

But the fact remained, whether Harry wanted to believe it or not, that Draco Malfoy had not destroyed Hermione's hand to torture her.

*He did it because I asked him to. Because I knew that tourniquet I conjured wouldn't hold against basilisk venom much longer. Because it was her hand or her life, and neither of us wanted her dead.*

Ron shoved the distractions to the back of his mind once more and refocused on his destination. Splinching either himself or Hermione at this point would only add disaster to a night which

didn't need it.

*But as soon as we get somewhere safe, I am going to need to have a long talk with Luna. Ginny too, and Hermione if she's awake by then.*

*If we're going to try and convince Harry that Malfoy's on our side now, we're going to need every bit of evidence we can get.*

---

Draco curled up in his hastily created nest of wood, catching his breath.

*I'm not sure I believe that worked.*

But his contact with the Manor, more fragmentary by the second as the house fell, had shown him the Quartet and Luna clambering out through the breach in the wall only moments before. Luna, before she took Harry's arm, had puckered her lips briefly, and Draco knew she'd meant that for him.

*Love you too, sweetheart. Take care, and I'll see you soon. Two and a half weeks...*

A thought occurred to him. Taking his Animagus form, he slipped out between the twisted timbers he'd fused together, making for the Snatcher Ron had Stunned first, who still lay where he'd fallen, along with most of the others who'd gone down under the combined assaults of spell and furniture. Greyback was gone, though the stink of burned hair still lingered in the room, and Lucius and Mother likewise, along with...

Draco wrinkled his nose. *What's he doing here? Suppose someone called him, since Ron and Hermione are technically still supposed to be at school.*

Reaching his goal, he set his teeth around one of the items in the man's pocket and pulled. It slid free, and he was just about to grab the other when a creaking above him and a warning rumble from the Manor-core sent him skittering madly out of danger, his objective clutched in his teeth. He was barely out of the way when a huge chunk of stone crashed down, obliterating the Snatcher.

*Ouch.* Draco bent his head and pulled two or three slivers of wood from his shoulders with his teeth. *Well, no real loss, not judging by what Ron was able to do. And I had better get back where I'm supposed to be.*

Shooting across the floor, he squeezed back into his little nest, then changed forms again and stuffed what he'd gone to get inside his robes. *Now, all I have to do is wait...*

Remembering, he laid a hand against the floor again. "This what you wanted?" he asked aloud. "Or will be, when it gets done?"

*(Yes.)* The response was quiet, but satisfied. *(Go well.)*

“Thanks. You... rest well, I guess.” Draco pulled his hand away, feeling vaguely unsettled. He’d just killed something, or as good as killed it when it wasn’t alive to begin with...

*But it wanted to die. To fall down, I guess. And it would have a long time ago if we hadn’t been holding it together with magic. So this is more letting things take their course than it is interfering. Besides, what else was I supposed to do?*

A small, smug smile appeared on his face. *I even managed to maintain my cover. Hermione was brilliant—there’s no way anyone will think it was really me making all that stuff move, not when she was screaming and pointing at everyone who got hit, and when I went down last of all. Aunt Bella’ll be sore but she ought to survive, I don’t know about Scabior, Greyback’ll have some nasty burns but he’ll recover, and me...*

The smile grew into a chuckle. *I am just fine, except for a couple little cuts on my arms. Though that in itself will be suspicious when I get dug out of here. I may have to do something about it. What looks good but—*

A resounding crash overhead cut off Draco’s thought. An instant later, a huge spear-like chunk of wood shot in through one of the holes in his shelter and gashed the back of his right calf. He yelped, then swore in three languages. “Solves *that* problem, doesn’t it?” he said bitterly, pulling his wand free and Vanishing the spear. “Ow .”

A quick bandage conjured around the spot stopped the bleeding, and the same spell he’d used on Hermione’s arm deadened the pain, but the leg still felt weaker than its mate. Still, everything worked—Draco wiggled his toes and flexed his foot to be sure—and now he had a proper injury to bear out his story.

*Though I think maybe I could have done without it.*

Pulling his legs into a tighter curl and reinforcing his shelter, just to be sure he wasn’t caught like that again, Draco shut his eyes and awaited rescue.

---

Against his will, Severus Snape was fascinated.

*Narcissa may be more like Cecilia than I ever knew. Lucius practically had to Stun her to get her out of the house with her sister and her son still trapped there, and she has not stopped berating him since...*

“Did you stop to think perhaps Draco’s little story might have more truth than anyone knew?” Narcissa snarled into her husband’s face.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Lucius said icily.

“How could the Granger Mudblood have made our home do this?” Narcissa’s finger stabbed towards the remains of Malfoy Manor, the last walls tipping inward at crazy angles, obviously

only seconds from falling completely. “How is it possible, Lucius? Tell me that!”

“Obviously, she does not have full control of her magic or herself. Not surprising, in a creature of her type. Draco’s goading was too much for her, and she snapped and had an outburst of accidental magic such as children do.” Lucius shook his head irritably. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh, you think it was only accidental magic?” Narcissa mimicked her husband’s tone on the last two words, which were punctuated by a distant *boom* as the final wall left standing collapsed. “When she could direct it, send it where she wanted, do as she pleased with it? No, Lucius, I think there was something else at work here.”

“What are you insinuating, Narcissa?”

“You have never made much of a secret of your... habits.” Narcissa began to prowl around Lucius, throwing the occasional word into his face before returning to her walking. “Perhaps you could remember this one? A year and a half before our son’s birth, a Muggle woman with hair such as the Granger girl’s... I should think that would be memorable even to you...”

Lucius gaped at his wife for a second, then drew breath to reply—

“Enough,” said a high, cold voice. “I will have an explanation, and I will have it now.”

Severus went to one knee before his so-called master, hiding a smile of satisfaction. Someone would have to pay for this night’s work, but he did not think it would be him.

*Though, ironically, I am the only one of us who has done anything tonight the Dark Lord might consider treacherous...*

## Be Careful 79: What Greeting You Give

Harry, Ginny, and Luna popped back into existence on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. Luna staggered a pace, Ginny nearly fell, and Harry had to fight to keep his own footing, for the night was harsh and blustery here as it had not been at Malfoy Manor. Ginny yanked Harry's sleeve and made spell-casting gestures, and Harry pulled out his wand and threw a general *Finite* at Ron as he appeared with Hermione. It was just in time, as Ron stumbled with the unexpected force of the wind and nearly lost his grip.

"Don't want her to blow away," Harry shouted over the gusts, hurrying to take some of Hermione's renewed weight in his own arms. "Which way?"

Ron nodded his head in the correct direction, and Ginny set off immediately, Luna lingering for one second to levitate the unconscious Hermione so that Harry and Ron could interlace their arms to make a chair for her. Harry's eyes fell again on the ruins of his friend's wrist, and his anger blazed up. *I hope your house fell in on you for that, Malfoy...*

Hermione settled, they started towards the cottage, which Harry could dimly see now by the lights from its windows. Voices became audible over the sound of the wind, and then Bill was hurrying out towards them, alarm visible on his scarred face, Fleur half a pace behind with her hair tangling itself into silver knots.

"All fine except her," Ron panted out as Bill lifted Hermione gently into his own arms. "But they know now about me, you've got to tell Mum and Dad—"

"Zey told us," Fleur interrupted. "Only a few minutes ago, Fred came to warn us. A message on ze Galleons, 'e said, from Ginny..."

"I'm not going home," said Ginny loudly from the door, where she was holding it open. Luna was inside, Harry could see now, spreading an old sheet across the sofa so that Bill would have a place to lay Hermione.

Fleur fixed her sister-in-law with a cool glare. "No one spoke of sending you," she said, and continued when Ginny flushed. "Zey were much concerned, especially when ze second message came through, ze one which said where exactly you 'ad been taken."

"Never mind that now," said Ron, sitting down on the floor beside the sofa where Hermione now

lay, her face slack in unconsciousness. “We’re all right. What about them?”

“Moved to Muriel’s,” said Bill, helping Ginny push the door shut. “Dad should be working the Fidelius Charm there now, and I’ve got to do one here as soon as we get you settled.”

“I think not,” said Fleur, who was bending over Hermione, examining the angry red flesh that now ended her right arm. “Ow was zis done? Does anyone know?”

Ron shook his head. “I was upstairs,” he said. “Harry and Ginny were outside. The only people who’d know that are—”

“I know,” said Luna quietly. “It was done with Fiendfyre.”

Fleur stared at the girl, and Bill blinked several times. “Luna, are you sure?” he said, striding over to look at her closely. “I mean, truly sure?”

“I know I sometimes believe things that you don’t understand,” said Luna, gazing up at him. “But I saw someone hurt with Fiendfyre only a few months ago, and Hermione’s arm looks just the same as his did. I am sure.”

“Damn.” Bill flicked his hair back from his face with an impatient gesture. “It’s Dark magic,” he explained when Ginny gave him an uncomprehending look. “I mean, they are Death Eaters, what else would you expect, but it’s worse even than what Snape used on George. I don’t think either of us can help her. She’s going to need a real Healer.”

“We can’t exactly take her to St. Mungo’s,” Harry said, sitting down on the arm of the chair Ginny had taken up residence in. “Are there any Healers in the Order? Left alive, I mean?” Part of him cringed at the reasonable tone of his words, but there wasn’t time to play games, not if Hermione was going to recover.

“Not in the Order, not exactly, but I do know who we can get.” Bill went to the door again and pulled it open. “I won’t be long.”

Harry leaned back against the chair and closed his eyes. His scar pulsed, trying to break through his tiredness and his worry for Hermione. Voldemort had not yet arrived at the remains of Malfoy Manor, but when he did, the punishments for any of the Death Eaters who had escaped the collapse of the house would be horrible.

*And I probably won’t be able to block it out. I never can anymore when he’s truly angry.*

“What happened in there, Ron?” Ginny asked from beside him. “How did you get out?”

“It’s a long story. If we’re going somewhere else tonight, I’d rather wait until we get there.”

The careful neutrality in Ron’s tone made Harry open his eyes again. Ron was sitting beside Hermione, holding her hand and watching her closely. The way the couch was turned in relation to Harry’s chair meant that Ron’s face was turned away from him, but Harry would have bet his last

Knut that Ron was chewing his lip as he did when he was trying to work out how much of what story to tell the latest authority figure who had caught them doing something against the rules.

*What's he hiding—and who's he hiding it from?*

The thought was interrupted by a banging on the door. “I’m back!” Bill shouted above the sound of the wind. “I’ve brought a friend!”

“Prove it,” Fleur called peremptorily, waving her hand at Harry and Ron, who drew their wands. Luna did the same, and Ginny eased herself to one side so that she could reach the hilt of the sword.

“We were married on the first of August, and Kingsley Shacklebolt sent his lynx Patronus to our reception to warn us the Death Eaters were coming!” Bill called back. “Our friend was there, and he and his wife helped us chase them away!”

Harry sat up a bit straighter. *His wife? Not many of the Order are married—*

Fleur opened the door with her wand, and Bill nearly fell through, followed by a greying man with a worn face, who was nevertheless smiling broadly.

“Professor!” Ginny cried, jumping up. Luna, too, was beaming at the sight of Remus Lupin, and Ron looked up gladly. Harry wasn’t sure what kind of welcome he should look for, after their last meeting, but Lupin forestalled his worries by hurrying over to him and embracing him warmly.

“You’re not hurt?” he said, looking Harry over anxiously, then Ginny and Luna. “Bill said it was Hermione—”

“It is,” said Ron, pulling back Hermione’s sleeve to display her ravaged wrist. “But I didn’t know you were a Healer.”

“I’m not.” Lupin hissed between his teeth at the sight of the damage, then went to one knee and lifted Hermione into his own arms. “Andromeda is, and Dora and I are staying with her for now because—well, why don’t we just go and you’ll see for yourselves.”

“Go?” Harry said. “All of us?”

“Are you willing to leave Hermione?” Lupin asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“No,” said Harry and Ron at the same moment.

“Then yes, all of you. There’s room. You remember, Harry, you saw the house, though probably not much of it.”

Harry nodded, remembering. “Hagrid and I stopped there first when we left the Dursleys’,” he explained to Luna, who was looking inquisitive. “If you’re sure it’s all right?”

Lupin shifted Hermione's weight, a small smile on his face. "Tonight, I think Andromeda would welcome even a barbarian horde," he said. "Fleur, Bill, I'm sorry to pop in and out—"

"Of course you must go," Fleur said, straightening up from where Bill had been whispering in her ear. "Give zem our best, and I 'ope to meet 'im soon."

"I hope that too." Lupin inclined his head to them, then stepped back out into the howling wind, Harry and Ginny following, Ron and Luna behind them. "Focusing on Andromeda Tonks' home should get you there," he shouted as Luna got a better grip on Ron's arm and Harry pulled Ginny close. "Don't be alarmed if you feel something brush past you on the way in, that's just the protective spells."

Harry nodded once and turned into the now-familiar darkness of Apparition, Ginny's hand warm against his arm. *Andromeda Tonks' home*, he recited to himself, visualizing the house he had seen blurrily for a moment from the outside, after Sirius' motorbike had crashed into the garden with him aboard it... Andromeda had been Sirius' favorite cousin, he remembered dimly, and wondered if her decision to marry a Muggleborn had helped Sirius to make his own break with the pureblood world...

An instant of roughness, like sandpaper against every inch of his skin, and then they were there, Ginny shuddering as though she had passed through cold water. The wind was not so bad here, and Lupin was already on his way to the door, calling out his identity as he went. Ron and Luna exploded into existence behind Ginny, Ron biting off the latter half of a swearword and Luna shaking her head. "That wasn't nice at all," she said. "But I suppose if it means we're safer here, it isn't too bad."

"Let's get inside," said Ginny, hurrying towards the door. "It looks like it might rain."

As though the sky had been waiting for her words, a few fat drops began to fall. The friends bolted for the safety of the house, but Ron, the last one up the steps, still had to wring out the hem of his robes before he went inside.

The house looked much as it had when Harry had last been there, except that Ted Tonks was no longer here, and never would be again. Harry felt a pang, thinking of the report on *Potterwatch*, and wondered if he should say something to Andromeda, but the older witch was already bending over Hermione, and the professional-sounding murmurs he could half-hear did not sound as though she would welcome distraction. Besides, he thought she might not like to be reminded of their other meeting, when he had mistaken her for her sister Bellatrix.

"Would you four—you three," Lupin corrected himself as Ron made a beeline for Hermione's side, "care to come upstairs? Dora would be glad to see you, and there's someone I want you to meet."

His small smile was back, and Harry recalled Fleur mentioning that she hoped to "meet 'im soon." He couldn't bring to mind who she could mean, but Ginny and Luna were trading excited glances, and climbed the stairs behind Lupin giggling together as though they were back at Hogwarts

getting ready to go out and cheer a Quidditch match.

“Ginny,” said Lupin as they reached the top of the stairs, “may I ask what on earth you’re wearing on your back?”

“It’s Gryffindor’s sword, Professor,” said Ginny in a mock-demure tone. “I stole it from Headmaster Snape’s office. Well, really I stole the Sorting Hat, but the sword comes out of it when it’s needed, you know.”

Lupin sighed, shaking his head. “Why am I not surprised Severus hasn’t been looking for you terribly hard?” he said rhetorically. “If you’ll let me put it somewhere safe for a moment, I’d just as soon you not wear it where we’re going. Not that Dora wouldn’t enjoy seeing it, but I’d rather she wait until... well, I think you understand.”

“I do.” Ginny unslung the scabbard’s belt from her shoulder and passed it to Lupin. “Here you are.”

“And here *you* are.” Lupin leaned into one of the bedrooms they were passing, turned on a light with his wand, and sent the sword levitating across the room to land on one of the beds. “You girls can be in here, since I doubt Andromeda will want Hermione moved even so far as upstairs at this point. Is Ron likely to want to stay near her, Harry? And you?”

“If it’s no trouble,” Harry said, wincing as his scar stabbed again and gave him a clear image of the ruins that had once been Malfoy Manor, with three or four people shouting at one another outside them.

“None at all. We’ll make you up some beds when you’re ready for them.” Lupin took another look at him. “Which I don’t think will be too long now. But for the moment, let’s give Andromeda a chance to finish examining Hermione, and you three can come and meet the newest member of the Order of the Phoenix.”

*The newest member?* Harry frowned as Lupin went to a closed door and knocked on it. *Is the Order still recruiting? I’d thought they all had to go into hiding...*

“Who’s there?” called Tonks’ voice from within the room.

“I’m back, darling,” Lupin answered. “With guests. Are you presentable?”

“Guests? Who—no, never mind, just give me a second.” A sound as of creaking bedsprings. “Yes, come in.”

Lupin opened the door, and Ginny shot inside, Luna on her heels. A cry of delight broke from both girls as Harry followed them in.

Tonks was sitting up in bed, covered by a knitted blanket, cradling a bundle in her arms. “Wotcher, you lot,” she said with a broad grin. “Come meet our Teddy.”

The pain in Harry's head vanished on the spot as he crossed the room to peer eagerly down at the tiny, scrunched face topped with sparse hair the color of Ginny's. He had seldom seen a baby before, and never one so young. "When was he born?" he asked.

"Just a couple hours ago." Tonks sighed, leaning back against the wall. "I'll be sore for a fortnight, but he's worth every second of it, aren't you, beautiful?" She bent and kissed her son's forehead.

"I should mention that he was born with black hair," Lupin added, chuckling in his throat. "Takes after his mummy, obviously."

"And not after his daddy," Tonks said, looking up. "Mum had time to do the test while you were away, love. You can stop worrying."

Lupin closed his eyes and sighed, and Harry saw half the lines go out of his face. Clearly the thought that his son might be a werewolf had still been preying on him despite his return to Tonks.

"You'll get to meet Hermione later," said Luna to little Ted in a sing-song tone, brushing his nose with a bit of her hair. "She's downstairs just now. Someday, when you're bigger, she'll tell you the story of the night she picked up Fenrir Greyback with magic and threw him into a fireplace..."

A slight choking noise from Lupin's direction was revealed, when Harry glanced up at him, to be restrained laughter. Tonks was staring openly at Luna, and Ginny seemed not to have heard, being busy investigating the way Teddy's hand would close around her finger when she stroked his palm.

For his own part, Harry wasn't sure what to think. *Luna seems to know what went on inside Malfoy Manor already, but how can she? She was outside with us, and she was never alone with Ron or Hermione long enough to find anything out...*

"Harry." Lupin's voice, speaking his name, brought Harry out of his thoughts, and he looked up to find the older wizard at his elbow. "We were hoping you'd agree to be Teddy's godfather."

"Me?" Harry blurted.

"Who better?" Tonks asked from the bed.

"I—wow—sure, of course!" Harry shook his head, trying to get rid of the feeling of unreality about the whole scene. "Blimey—thanks—"

"Care to hold your godson?" Lupin steered Harry towards the bed without waiting for a reply, and Ginny scooted out of the way to let Harry sit down, then leaned in to arrange his unresisting arms into a cradle. Tonks sat forward, wincing slightly as she did, and deposited Teddy there, lying back with a sigh of relief.

"Hi," Harry said uncertainly, looking down at the baby. "Welcome, I guess. Sorry there's a war on. We're trying to get it done with, but we haven't been doing so well lately..."

The good-natured laughter around him, and the feeling of something precious and fragile and living in his arms, banished the last vestiges of Voldemort from Harry's mind for the moment, and pieces of information he'd had for months whirled into new places, locking together to form a conclusion.

"We're going to need your help," he said, looking up at Lupin.

"Of course, Harry. Anything I can do." Lupin sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. "What is it?"

"As soon as Hermione's well enough to travel, we're going to Hogwarts." Harry watched as Teddy scrunched up his face still more, in an expression reminiscent of Tonks, and his few tufts of hair began to turn blond. "We need a way inside, and we need a way to find something hidden there. Because once we find it..."

*Once we find it, we can end this.*

*And maybe I won't need to do anything for my godson except give him too much chocolate and send him home all wound up.*

## Be Careful 80: What Life You Take

“Lucius,” said Lord Voldemort, enunciating each syllable of the name with painfully obvious care. Lucius Malfoy winced away from it, but rose to his feet and faced the Darkest wizard in a hundred years, the master he had chosen to serve.

*He shows more courage than I thought he would, after the punishments he has already merited, Severus Snape mused from his place two or three paces behind the other man. I wonder if he hopes that the loss of his son and his home will shield him from his Master’s wrath?*

“My lord!”

Snape, Lucius, and Voldemort all turned to look at Narcissa, who was still on her knees, pale and trembling. “My lord, I *know* my son is alive—my sister may be as well—please, let us go and find them, before it is too late!”

Voldemort flicked a hand, granting the necessary permission, and Narcissa sprang up and ran towards the house, her wand already in her hand. Severus stood up to follow her, glancing for a moment at Fenrir Greyback, the only other member of the party to make it out of the collapsing Malfoy Manor. The werewolf lay half-conscious among some bushes several yards away, sucking air through his teeth as his burns pained him.

*I somehow doubt anyone here will lift a finger to help him, unless the Dark Lord decides he is more useful alive than dead and commands it. And speaking of life and death...*

“Why are you so certain Draco lives?” he asked Narcissa, joining her in the rubble of the front room.

“Because.” She levitated a stout timber out of the way. “If he were dead, so would you be.”

“What are you talking about?” Severus stepped back and cast a quick *Hominem revelio* over the whole area, finding two distinct signatures which he marked with small blue flames.

“The Vow you swore to me, Severus.” Narcissa pushed sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes. “You staked your life on watching over my son, on protecting him from harm.”

“To the best of my ability,” Severus countered. “I could hardly have protected him from a house falling on him, especially when I did not arrive until it had already happened!”

Narcissa laughed shortly. “Be that as it may, I choose to believe my child is alive. I will believe it until I see his lifeless body, and even then I will continue to hope—what was that?”

Severus dropped to one knee to listen more closely. From somewhere beneath their feet, a faint noise was emanating. It could have been made by creaking timbers, or by the settling of fallen bricks...

*But it could also be a human voice.*

“Draco?” Narcissa went to her knees beside Severus. “Draco, is that you?”

The noise paused, then returned louder. This time, it was clearly a voice, though the words were indistinct. Another pause, a sound as of shifting material, and suddenly Severus understood what was being said: “Hello? Is someone up there?”

“Draco!” The cry was straight from a mother’s heart, and Severus backed away several paces as Narcissa flung herself to the ground. “Draco, are you hurt, are you trapped? Speak to me, tell me where you are...”

*I doubt I am needed here any longer.* Severus made a tactful withdrawal, beginning to excavate instead the other location his spell had indicated. A few moments’ work discovered the ruins of a large and ornate couch, and under the couch, a battered but still breathing Bellatrix LeStrange. His cursory examination made Severus wince in sympathy—it seemed that Hermione Granger, if it truly was she who had flung Bella into the wall, had done so with enough power to shatter three of Bella’s vertebrae, along with several bones in both her legs and her arms.

*But it was done in a Muggle fashion, with simple brute force, not with any form of magic which resists healing. If we take her to St. Mungo’s immediately, they may be able to reverse the damage. She will be a few weeks recovering, of course, and with any luck she will try to do too much too soon and paralyze herself for life...*

Quickly shielding those thoughts from sight, Severus turned back around in time to see Draco Malfoy’s head and shoulders emerge from a hole in the rubble as from the shell of an oversized egg.

*That would make Narcissa the mother hen, which part she seems to delight in playing.* The youngest of the Black sisters was weeping openly for joy, wiping away her tears with the hand not wielding her wand, which was enlarging the hole to allow her son to extract himself better. *Somehow I doubt she will get quite the reward she craves.*

Draco pulled his right leg out, its calf wrapped in a white bandage spotted with red, and rested it alongside the hole, then leaned around its edge to embrace his mother tightly.

*Of course, I could always be wrong.*

Severus frowned, a false note striking him about the two. From the manner in which they were

reacting to this disaster, anyone would have thought Narcissa had been the one rescued from a hideous death by crushing or suffocation under tons of rubble, and Draco the heroic rescuer who was doing only what was expected of him.

*Narcissa's overreaction I can understand—she has lived her life among people so desensitized to emotion that a grand display must be made to get any point across at all. But Draco... even as a child, he would wail for hours if he so much as skinned his knee or dropped his sweet in the dirt, and he did not become more tolerant of pain and suffering as he grew older. Too, he has never paid much attention to the feelings of others; he is too busy worrying about his own. And here he is, comforting Narcissa.*

A fragment of Draco's conversation drifted back to Severus' ears: "...barely hurt at all, I've had worse in class, and tomorrow we won't even remember it was there..."

*I would expect this level of solicitude for another from a Weasley, not a Malfoy. And this Malfoy least of all.*

*What has happened to him over the past year—and why have I not seen it before tonight?*

---

Lucius had never in his life been closer to true panic. He had told his story, placing the best possible interpretation on facts which were not conducive to such an exercise, and now he was kneeling before his Master and waiting, waiting for a sentence which he knew could only be one thing.

*Death. And not only for me, but for Narcissa and for Draco, if it has not already come to my child, trapped in the wreck of our home by a mad girl's magic.*

*Though, if Narcissa is right, she may also have been my child.*

The idea, as unpalatable as it was, that he had accidentally fathered Hermione Granger made more sense the more Lucius thought about it. It would explain her undoubtedly excellent magic and intelligence, as well as the way she had escaped from their house once and destroyed it on her second visit.

*If I had only known what she might someday wreak, I would have killed her mother after I was finished with her, or perhaps never gone out that night at all...*

"Severus," the Dark Lord's voice broke into Lucius' scattered thoughts. "What have you found?"

"Bellatrix is badly injured but alive, my lord," said Snape, whose black boots Lucius could now see from the corner of his eye. "She will need prompt treatment, but I believe she can be saved."

"Good. And the boy?"

Lucius forced his jaw to relax, as his teeth ached with the strain of willing the other man to

answer.

“Draco, it seems, retained both his wand and a modicum of wit,” Snape said. “He was able to form a shelter around himself, and his only real injury is to the back of one leg, messy but easily healed. Narcissa is bringing him out now.”

The wild relief that rushed over Lucius was tempered almost instantly by renewed fear. Draco might have survived for the moment, but the Dark Lord knew many ways to kill that were slower and more painful than being crushed by rubble or suffocating on one’s own exhaled breath...

“Rise, Lucius,” his Master commanded, and Lucius rose, half-turning just long enough to catch sight of his son leaning heavily on his wife as they made their way out of the destroyed house before returning his gaze to the snake-like face before him.

“It seems fate has been kind to you,” the Dark Lord said, tapping his wand idly against his fingertips. “Perhaps I shall see my way clear to do the same.”

“M-my lord?” Lucius forced down his hope, keeping his tone simply querying with a great effort.

“Come now, Lucius, you know what I would usually mete out for a failure of this scope.” The smile which appeared on the lipless mouth was frightening even to one who had seen many of its kind. “Tell me, what would it be?”

“It would be... death, my lord.” Lucius swallowed, trying to keep his throat from drying out completely, before continuing. “Both to the one who failed, and to his family.”

“Exactly. To ensure that the regrettable trend of failure does not continue. But as I said, fate has been kind to you tonight.” Red eyes rested on Narcissa as she helped Draco sit down on one of the ornamental stone benches which adorned the front garden. “So I believe I shall also be kind. I shall give you a choice.”

“A choice, my lord?”

“Yes, Lucius, a choice. A very simple one.” The Dark Lord returned his gaze to Lucius, red eyes boring into grey, and Lucius felt his mind gripped in the irresistible power of his Master. “Take your wand in your hand.”

Without his conscious direction, Lucius’ hand slid into his wand pocket and brought out the wand which had once belonged to Alastor Moody.

“Good. Now, I give you the freedom to make your choice.” The mental pressure vanished. “Choose one of three, and choose wisely.”

“One of three what, my lord?” Lucius asked, though his throat closed on the end of the last word as the answer came to him unprompted.

“I had not thought you so slow, Lucius.” The tone was chiding, as a teacher to a favorite but

foolish pupil. “Malfoys. There are three Malfoys. All of you wear my Mark, therefore you belong to me, and I say there are too many of you. I give you the power to decide which one shall be removed, but decide quickly. Otherwise, I may change my mind and conclude I need no Malfoys at all...”

---

Severus, listening quietly to one side, buried his tiny sympathy for Lucius under a flood of gloating glee that at long last the great Malfoys would be permanently brought low.

*I could tell him the wisest choice to make, but I doubt he would listen to me. Both listening, and the answer I would give him, go against his grain, and even in this extremity he has his pride.*

Narcissa and Draco had been observing the conversation between Lucius and Voldemort, though Severus doubted they could hear much from where they were. Now Narcissa stood up from where she had been kneeling by the bench and came a few paces forward, holding Lucius’ eyes with her own.

Draco frowned, shifting sideways on the bench to try to see his mother’s face. Severus was at a far better angle, and felt his heart contract as he read Narcissa’s expression.

*She knows. She knows what has been demanded. And she is demanding something of her own—she is forcing Lucius into perhaps the worst decision he could possibly make—*

“Mother?” Draco started to stand up. “What’s—”

“*Avada Kedavra,*” Lucius breathed, the words almost without sound. The bolt of green sprang from his wand and caught Narcissa full on the chest, and she fell like the blossom she was named for.

Draco froze, halfway upright. Lucius stood with his wand still outstretched, visibly shaking. The Dark Lord gave a slow, satisfied nod and turned away, moving towards the place where Severus had uncovered Bellatrix.

*The worst decision he could possibly make.* Severus backed away two paces, watching the silent tableau of father and son. *For his own sake, if for no one else’s.*

Lucius’ wand came down at last, and he sank to his knees, his shoulders quivering. The movement seemed to release Draco from his stillness, and he straightened completely, throwing his own shoulders back. In slow, deliberate steps, he closed the distance between himself and his mother’s body, limping not at all on his wounded leg.

When he reached Narcissa’s side, Draco knelt. Gently, he straightened her limbs and robes, closing her eyes with fingers light as a breath of wind, until she lay at peace, seemingly sleeping. Reaching into her pocket, he brought out her wand, and drew his own across it once. It trembled in his hand, then became a slender green stem, from the end of which blossomed a white rose. He laid it on her chest, arranged her hands around it, and stood once more.

Lucius stirred, lifting his head. “Draco,” he croaked, reaching out a hand to his son.

Draco made neither sound nor motion that might have indicated he had heard. His eyes roved the gardens until they found Severus, and he started across the grounds towards the Headmaster, still moving at the careful pace that allowed him to walk without favoring his injury. “Sir,” he said when he was close enough to be heard. “May I spend the rest of the holidays at Hogwarts?”

“You may,” Severus said, resisting his urge to give the boy—no, the young man—a hand to steady him. It would not be kindly received at the moment. “Wait for me past the Apparition boundaries.”

Draco inclined his head and started up the lane, his steps firm and unwavering.

*So it seems I must eat all my words in regards to Draco Malfoy. He is more, far more, than his father has ever been or can ever hope to be.*

*But I cannot help wondering, how has it happened—and why now?*

A choked sob drew his attention back to Lucius, who had his face in his hands. Submitting to a small, wicked urge, Severus crossed to the other wizard, going to one knee beside him. “My condolences on your choice,” he said, glancing at Narcissa’s body.

Lucius raised his head and glared at Severus. “What is *that* supposed to mean?” he spat.

“She might someday have forgiven you.” Severus turned to watch Draco, who was just levitating the twisted gates of Malfoy Manor out of his way in order to cross into the world beyond them. “He never will.”

He rose and went to attend the Dark Lord, leaving Lucius alone with his guilt and his grief.

## Be Careful 81: What You Decide

“How are you suddenly so sure where the last one is?” Ginny demanded of Harry in a whisper as they descended the stairs, Luna behind them. “We’ve been trying to decide between Gringotts and Hogwarts for months!”

“Luna,” Harry said promptly, stopping to turn back at her. “Was the one you sent us from Gringotts?”

“Yes, it was.” Luna beamed at him. “You’re very clever to figure that out so fast.”

“So that just leaves Hogwarts,” Harry said to Ginny, shrugging. “Not too hard.”

“Yes, but how did you know *that*?” Ginny jabbed a finger at Luna.

“She couldn’t have found it at Hogwarts or she’d have told you, for one thing,” Harry said, letting his voice follow where his brain had already led. “For another, she was at Malfoy Manor, and Malfoy went to Gringotts this fall, to the Lestrangle vault, it was what he wanted for catching Ron. He probably spotted the cup there and took it, and you and your friend,” he looked up at Luna again, “nicked it off him and sent it to us. Right?”

Luna nodded. “He wasn’t very careful with it,” she said reprovingly as they started downstairs again. “I’ll have to speak with him about that when I see him next.”

Harry was about to ask her what this meant, but Andromeda Tonks looked up at the sound of their voices and beckoned them nearer. She was sitting beside Hermione, who lay, still unconscious, on the same sort of cushions Harry remembered awakening among the previous summer.

Ron had Hermione’s hand in his, and looked up with a worried smile at Harry and the girls. “See the baby?” he asked.

“He’s darling,” said Ginny, sitting down. “How is she?”

“She’ll live,” Mrs. Tonks said. “But the magic used on her precludes most types of Healing. I’ve done what I can, and she should wake without pain, but her hand is gone. She’ll have to learn to use the other.”

Harry swallowed against a sick feeling. His stupidity in starting to say Voldemort’s name might

not have killed Hermione outright, but what it had done was almost worse. How far back would this set the wandwork she'd always been so proud of? Would she be able to fight, to defend herself, to keep up with him and Ron and Ginny, or would they have to leave her behind and finish the war without her?

*She'd never forgive us. Worse, she'd never forgive herself.*

"She may sleep for some time," Mrs. Tonks was saying now, "and it is possible she may not recall what happened to her. She will certainly be shocked and angry, and she may experience what is called phantom pain—"

Harry's scar blazed up, and the sick tightness in his throat redoubled. A sense of satisfaction, even of glee, filled his mind, for who could fail to understand the message of this night, that the Dark Lord punished failure no matter whose? It was always a shame to lose a Death Eater, of course, but better to have two who would obey orders without question than three who might form into a cabal against him... now he would go to see Bellatrix, and call Rodolphus and Rabastan to tend her, and then return with Severus to the place he should have guessed long ago held what he was seeking...

"She's dead," Harry breathed into the darkness behind his eyelids, and didn't realize until he heard his own words that he'd spoken aloud.

---

Ginny slid closer to Harry, catching his hands between her own and repressing a shiver at their chill. *He can't keep going like this, not for much longer. Sharing a mind with You-Know-Who... it's destroying him, he's not going to make it out of this war alive unless we can end it soon...*

"Who, Harry?" Luna said softly. "Who's dead?"

Harry opened his eyes and blinked a few times, squinting as though the dim light in the room were too bright for him. After a moment, he focused on Mrs. Tonks, who was watching him warily. "I'm sorry," he said, coughing on the end of the second word. "It's your sister."

Mrs. Tonks lowered her head and smoothed an imaginary wrinkle out of her robes. "Bella?" she asked her lap.

Harry's fingers curled around Ginny's, his grip just short of pain. "No."

"I see." Mrs. Tonks looked up and met Harry's eyes. "Thank you."

She got to her feet and left the room through a door at the far end. Without a word, Luna stood up and followed her, leaving Ginny, Harry, and Ron alone with Hermione's softly breathing form.

"I could've sworn Malfoy's mum was all right when we left," said Ron, looking after Mrs. Tonks. "Did you see what happened, Harry? Was she caught in the house?"

“No.” Harry’s grip was painful now, but Ginny wasn’t about to ask him to let go, not with the desperate need she could hear in his voice. “She was... it was a punishment. Because you escaped. He thought the Malfoys were plotting against him, and he wanted to break them up. So he made Lucius kill her. In front of Draco.” His breathing was ragged and harsh, his sentences emerging in fragments. “No one should have to watch that. Watch their own mother die. But *he* enjoyed it. You-Know-Who did.”

“He’s evil,” Ginny said, hoping the meaning behind the two words would penetrate Harry’s thick skull for once. *He’s evil, and you’re not. Even now, when you’re blaming Draco for hurting Hermione, you still don’t hate him enough to want this to happen to him.*

“I know.” Harry drew one deep breath and sat up straighter, relaxing his hold on Ginny’s hands. “Ron, I need your help. When you were staying at Shell Cottage, with Ollivander, did you ever talk to him? Did he ever tell you anything about what You-Know-Who wanted with him, why they took him?”

“Some, yeah. Why?”

“I need you to tell me.”

Ron fidgeted with the edge of a cushion. “I never liked to bring it up before,” he said. “I thought it might...”

“Make me worse about the Elder Wand?” Harry finished, and Ron flushed. “That was it, wasn’t it? That was what *he* wanted to know about?”

“Yeah,” Ron admitted. “At first they just wanted him to make wands for them, not for anybody else.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a short, thin wand. “He told me about making one for Wormtail. This must be it. But then after last summer, after your wand did that thing with the fire, then You-Know-Who started asking about the Elder Wand, or whatever you want to call it. And Ollivander told him what he wanted to know.”

“So it is real,” Ginny said, glancing at the sleeping Hermione.

“Yeah, it’s real.” Ron rested his hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “It’s had loads of names, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny...” He lowered his voice into a deep bass register for the last three words, startling Ginny into a brief giggle. “But it’s always supposed to be the most powerful wand around. Unbeatable. And that means if you want it...”

“You have to take it some other way,” murmured Harry, his eyes half-shut again. “Like the wizard in the story, who killed the oldest brother for it.”

Ginny swallowed. “Does it have to be murder?” she asked, not sure if she was more fascinated or repelled by the concept. “I mean, could you just steal it without killing the person who had it?”

Ron shrugged. “I suppose, but why take the chance? If you’re looking for an unbeatable wand,

you're probably not the squeamish type. And whoever you got it off isn't going to be either, and they wouldn't be too pleased with you. Maybe if you made sure they could never come back at you..." He trailed off, looking nervously at Harry. "Mate? What's wrong?"

"He knows where it is." Harry's voice was barely audible. "He's going to take it."

"What, *now*?" Ginny blurted. "Right this second?"

"We have to do something," Ron said over her. "We have to stop him—"

"No." Harry spoke through clenched teeth, sweat starting to appear on his forehead. "That isn't right."

"And letting You-Know-Who get an unbeatable wand *is*?" Ron shouted.

"It's the Horcruxes we have to get." Harry's eyes were unfocusing even as he spoke. "Not the Hallows. We have to trust..."

His eyes fell shut, and he pitched forward, Ron catching him just in time. Ginny sighed and plucked off Harry's glasses, sliding them into his front pocket as Ron laid him down beside Hermione.

"Don't take this wrong, Ron," she said, "but every now and again I wish you'd picked a different seat on the train your first year."

"Yeah, right." Ron pulled a blanket up over Harry and Hermione, pitching his voice unnaturally high this time. "Mummy, it's Harry Potter, please can I go look at him, please, please—"

Ginny snatched the nearest unoccupied cushion and thwacked Ron soundly with it. Ron was about to retaliate when Lupin cleared his throat from the stairs.

"Perhaps that could wait until morning?" he suggested when they both looked around. "Ginny, your bed's ready, and Luna, wherever she's got to..."

"In there with Mrs. Tonks," Ron said, pointing. "Harry's asleep already, and I can kip right here if you have a spare sheet."

Lupin drew his wand and conjured one, tossing it to Ron. Ginny gave her brother a brief hug and headed for the stairs, yawning as she went. *It must be nearly midnight...*

"Past it, actually," said Lupin quietly as she passed him. "But since I doubt you have any pressing appointments, we'll let you have a lie-in."

Ginny giggled. "Thank you, Professor," she said. "And for having us at all. Good night."

"Good night, Ginny."

---

“Take the boy up to the school,” Lord Voldemort ordered. “I will join you there presently.”

“Yes, my lord.” Severus bowed, as did Draco, though Severus noticed the gray eyes remained fixed on the ground, never rising to Voldemort’s face.

*Hiding his thoughts, most likely. His Occlumency was sufficient to block me, but it would not hold against the Dark Lord.*

“We should take you to the hospital wing,” he said, turning away from Voldemort to face Draco. “Your leg needs tending.”

“I know some healing spells, sir. I’d rather take care of it myself.”

“If you prefer.”

*Of course he would prefer, Severus berated himself as he led the way up to the castle. He has just seen his mother killed in front of his eyes. The last thing he wants is to spend more time with other people for whom he must put on a front of normality.*

“Sir?” Draco said hesitantly as they reached the front steps.

“Yes?”

“I had a question about magic theory. I can ask Professor Flitwick tomorrow if you’d rather not —”

“No, ask,” Severus interrupted, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“When two people swear an Unbreakable Vow, and one of them dies.” Draco stepped into the entrance hall and watched the oak doors swing shut behind them. “Does that end the Vow, or is it still in force?”

“That depends on which person died,” said Severus cautiously, looking sideways at the young man. “Was it the one who swore the Vow, or the one to whom it was sworn?”

“The second.” Draco met Severus’ gaze for a moment, but there was nothing but darkness behind his eyes. “I was just wondering.”

*Of course you were. Of course. And my conversation with your mother, who is now dead, about a Vow I made to her, has nothing to do with your wondering.*

*For my part, I wonder, Draco, just how much of that conversation could you hear?*

“In that case, no,” he answered belatedly. “The Vow does not end.”

Draco nodded and turned towards the door which led to the dungeons and the Slytherin dormitories. Before he reached it, he looked back over his shoulder. “Headmaster?”

“Yes?” Severus paused on the first step of the marble staircase.

“Thank you.”

And before Severus could respond, the young man was gone.

---

Draco didn't remember the walk down to the dorm, or giving the password at the right bit of wall, or making his way back to his own room and his own bed. He knew he must have done it, but his memory cut out at thanking Snape and picked back up with him sitting on the edge of his bed, mind empty of all but one thought.

*My mother is dead.*

Methodically, he removed his robes and hung them in his wardrobe. His pajamas went on over his pants and T-shirt. Into his pocket he thrust his wand, then climbed onto the bed and shut the curtains.

*My mother is dead. And it's my fault.*

Closing his eyes, he imagined himself small and lithe and furred, and an instant later he was burrowing under the pillow, shivering with the reaction he hadn't allowed himself to have until this moment.

*My mother is dead. And I killed her.*

A forlorn, high-pitched whining sounded through the room for a moment, then ceased.

## Be Careful 82: How You Mourn

Marcus Black awakened with a sour taste in his mouth, his sheets knotted around his legs, and his pajama shirt damp with sweat. Unwinding himself and sliding out of bed silently, so as not to wake his dormmates, he reviewed his options. Either he'd had a nightmare (but he would have remembered one bad enough to do this), he was coming down with something (though his sister would surely have noticed the night before), or...

He shut his eyes and laid a hand against the stone wall of his dormitory, letting his Ravenclaw abilities seek out the source of the wrongness. Within seconds he had his answer.

*It's bad, worse than I've come across before, even in hospital.* His father had taken him to St. Mungo's on several occasions, both to learn what different types of need felt like to his special sensitivity and to teach him to block what he couldn't help. *And it's close, very close. Here, in the dorm.*

He concentrated harder, narrowing down his focus. *Boys' side. Older students. Seventh years...*

The personality "scent" of his target seeped into Marcus' nose, and he broke the contact with Hogwarts immediately. Snatching up his dressing gown and shoving his feet into slippers, he bolted out through the common room and up the nearest stairs, headed for a particular set of quarters.

Some things a bloke could handle by himself. For others, he needed parents.

---

Draco lay in a tight ball under his pillow, his long gray form doubled back on itself and his nose shoved against his own side. He wasn't sure how long he'd been there, or if he'd ever fallen asleep. Knowing that would have required too much thinking.

For the first time since his successful completion of Animagus back in January, he was truly appreciative of the change in outlook that his animal form allowed. His pain, his grief, his guilt, all seemed one step removed when he wore fur and four legs. They still crowded around him, threatened to overwhelm him, but he could take refuge in the simple comforts of his mongoose mind. He was hidden here, warm and dry, with no predators threatening him.

*None except the ones I make myself.*

Perhaps, he thought drowsily, he would stay in this form forever. It didn't matter if he forgot his human mind—what good had a human mind ever done him, or anyone else around him?

*None. I just hurt people and get them killed, good people who didn't deserve it. But as long as I stay an animal, all my friends will be animals too, and that doesn't have to happen anymore...*

A whoosh of cloth alerted him that someone had opened his bedcurtains. He curled up tighter. *Go away, he willed whoever it was. If you're human, go away. I'm not a good person to know.*

Someone lifted the pillow away from him. Draco whipped his head around, ready to snarl and bite, then stopped in surprise.

The form looming above him was definitely not human.

Before he could figure out what it was, it had dropped the pillow on the middle of the bed and clamped its jaws around him instead. He squealed and started to struggle, but a warning rumble came from his captor's chest, and sharp teeth dug into his side. *I don't want to hurt you, she seemed to be saying. Hold still.*

Draco went limp, concentrating instead on figuring out who this was. Female, the creature now carrying him out of the dorm was female, he'd got that without having to think about it—sharp teeth meant a predatory form, and that growl had sounded canine—

The female wolf trotted through the door of a small room and dropped Draco onto a mattress on the floor near the far wall. Glancing back to be sure he was watching, she returned to the door, pulled it shut with her teeth, and wagged the handle with a paw.

*She wants me to know it's not locked. It's there to keep other people out, not to keep me in. I can leave any time I want.*

*I should leave now. I shouldn't stay here, not when I put everyone I care about in danger.*

Blunt claws clicked against floorstones, accompanied by a sweet milky smell, and the wolf's brown-furred muzzle nudged Draco farther back on the mattress, giving her room to climb up beside him.

*But considering she already is Danger, I think maybe this once I can stick around.*

It was a stupid argument and he knew it. He should have been out that door already, finding a way off the grounds and up into the mountains, getting himself away from people who might be hurt by his presence. Instead he was here, letting Danger curl up around him protectively, even resting his nose on her paw. She licked the back of his neck once, then sighed and laid her head down beside him.

*It's only polite not to leave while she's awake, Draco told himself. I'll wait until she falls asleep. She shouldn't take too long about it, it must be pretty early still, and Jenny's not sleeping through the night yet. I can wait a few minutes.*

*Just a few minutes.*

*That's all.*

---

At Remus' nod, Cecilia pulled the door open. Draco was fast asleep against Danger, his sleek pearl-gray fur a startling contrast to her curling brown. Cecy knelt and laid her fingers on her son's side, invoking again the power she had used at Christmas to bypass his dream state and keep him from making transit inadvertently. For this one day, no matter how often or how deeply he slept, Draco would waken to this world.

*I wish I could be with him, but judging by what Luna has been able to tell Starwing and what Severus has told me, my presence would only hurt him more. I must trust others with his care for today, and spend my time elsewhere.*

Kissing the fingertips of her other hand, she brushed them against Draco's ear, making it quiver. *I love you, my darling, and when you are ready to hear it, I will tell it to you, as many times as you need to hear it to believe. Until I see you again, be well.*

She stood up and left the room, bound for the main floor and the room behind the Great Hall. No one else would be there so early, or if they were they would respect her desire for solitude. There she could pay her silent respects to a woman whom, but for the grace of God, she might have been.

*Though I think and hope that she would consider the greatest gift possible to be my continued care of the son for whom she died...*

---

Hunger woke Draco a second time. He was human again, and Danger was gone. Moony sat at a desk across the room, manipulating figurines about the size of chess pieces with his wand, though he turned in his chair at Draco's first movement. "Good morning," he said. "Though it's nearly good afternoon. How do you feel?"

Draco shrugged, rolling onto one elbow and shoving himself upright. "Not sure."

"We know the basic facts of what happened last night, your time." Moony might have been laying out a lesson Draco had missed in class for all the emotion in his voice. "If you care to talk about it, that's fine."

"Talk about what?" Draco's fingernails cut into his palms as he closed his hands into fists. "Talk about the way I killed my own mother? My *real* mother, not just someone who looks like her and spins smooth little stories about love and loneliness?"

"Be careful of taking too much on yourself." Moony picked up one of the figurines, now motionless, and twirled it between his fingers. "Your actions played a part in what happened, but I would hardly say from what I know that you killed your mother."

Draco jumped to his feet. “If I hadn’t done what I did, she’d still be alive!” he shouted. His hands ached with the need to lash out, to spread his pain. “If I hadn’t betrayed her and everything she taught me!”

“She taught you to care for others,” said Moony, setting down the figurine with a small thump. “Or if she didn’t, she would have wanted to.”

“How do you know? You never knew her! None of you did!” Draco’s throat hurt from the force of his words, but they would not be denied. “And now no one will ever know her again, because of *me!* I’m not stupid, I know what was going on! There was a deal, something about her or me, and she picked herself, and she never should have, because I’m not worth it! Not to her, not with what she thought was right! She’d have been *ashamed* of me if she knew what I was doing every night, do you understand that? She’d bloody well have disowned me!”

“I think you’re wrong.”

The calm tone only infuriated Draco more. “You think I’m wrong? Well, *I* think I’m *right!* She would never have agreed with any of what goes on here, never, and neither should I—”

He stopped short, understanding coming at last. “You made me do this,” he said, the heat in his chest compressing momentarily into a block of ice. “You did something to me. You played with my mind, messed me around. This is all some big fancy trick, isn’t it, *Lupin?* That’s all it’s ever been!”

The older wizard, Lupin as he *must* be, rose and stood motionless beside the desk as Draco strode across the room. “You’re laughing up your sleeve because you got me to do all your dirty work for you,” he snarled at his former professor, “got me to care about Mudbloods and monsters like you and give up everything I ever wanted for a fast line and a pretty face, and now it’s *my* mother who’s dead but all *your* precious people are just fine!”

He hurled a punch at Lupin’s face. The werewolf dodged adeptly and made a swipe of his own, and an instant later Draco found himself pinioned, wrapped in Lupin’s arms with his back to the older man’s front. He struggled furiously, but his hands were trapped against his sides.

“Not all my ‘precious people’ are ‘just fine’ right now,” Lupin said quietly in his ear. “One in particular is very upset.”

“Let go of me, werewolf!”

“As you like.”

Lupin released him, and Draco dashed into the center of the room, shaking. “I am *nothing* to you,” he snapped towards the far wall, surreptitiously feeling for his wand—yes, there it was, still safe in his pocket. “I never will be.”

“If you say so.” Lupin’s footsteps sounded, and Draco turned just enough to see that the werewolf

had planted himself in front of the room's only door. "But as I was saying, one person I regard as very precious is angry and grieving today, and I want to help him. If he thinks dueling with me would help him, then I'm at his disposal. I can't let him hurt me or leave here with the intent to hurt other people, but anything else is fair game."

*You can't let me?* Draco sneered to himself and reached for his wand. *Try and stop me, old man. For all the kinds of fool you and your friends have been making me look this year, you've done me one great favor. You've trained me. I'm faster than I've ever been, stronger too. I'll have you on your knees to me before I'm finished, asking my pardon for everything you've put me through...*

His fingers closed just short of his wand's hilt as words rang silently in his mind.

*"Please, my lord, please... I'm sorry, I did my best, please..."*

The voice was his own, terrified, pleading, hopeless, and with it came the flashing image of the moment he had spoken those words. He knelt at the feet of a real monster, his mind exposed under the gaze of its pitiless red eyes, begging that his life not end tonight, that he be spared another day, another hour.

*Mother didn't beg. She didn't say anything. She went towards death, not away from it.*

*For me. She did that for me.*

*How can anyone be that strong? What let her do that?*

"She knew about Luna," Lupin said into the silence.

Draco whipped around, glaring. "What?"

"Your mother." The older wizard's voice hadn't lost its calm edge; it was as imperturbable as a frozen lake. "She heard you one night, the two of you, singing and talking. Your Silencing Charms must have been sloppy."

*Silencing Charms. As in a dream, Draco recalled the moment. I was in such a hurry to hear Luna sing again, I didn't bother weaving the edges on the wall and ceiling charms... everyone was asleep anyway, I thought, and the bedrooms are miles from the music room...*

"She came downstairs to listen, and stayed for quite a while." A slight, fond smile touched Lupin's lips. "You and Luna were in no hurry to go to bed, and while she could hear you planning out your future together, neither was she."

*Our future. Draco brought his hands up to eye level and stared at them. The future I wanted to have. How could I have thought it wasn't real? And I was ready to attack someone who's never been anything but good to me, someone who called me his own when I'd just called him a monster and tried to hurt him—*

"What have I done?" he whispered.

“Nothing.” Lupin—no, *Moony* —crossed the room in three strides and caught Draco just as his legs stopped working, easing him down onto the mattress in the corner again. “Given yourself a sore throat for tomorrow, that’s all.”

“But what I *said* —”

“Was not you talking,” Moony interrupted smoothly. “Grief and anger weaken us, they let out the darkness that lives in us all.” He looked Draco straight in the eye, with never a hint of humor in his expression or his voice. “Will you let me be your strength for today?”

Draco’s voice failed him, but he didn’t need words, he was already across the space between them and clinging tight before his last resolve failed and his tears came. Strong arms held him close, a man’s voice murmured comfort, and he knew what it was to have a father, before he stopped knowing anything besides his pain.

“I didn’t deserve it,” he remembered sobbing out, shaking with the knowledge of how his life had been ransomed. “I’m not worth that.”

“No one is,” Moony answered him gently. “No one ever is. All we can do is try to be, and keep trying even when we fail.”

The honesty brought some measure of consolation in its wake, and Draco found himself bereft of tears and his eyes closing sooner than he had thought possible. When he awakened again, Abby was nestled against him, sound asleep with her arms around his waist. Danger and Moony sat across the room, talking in low voices and eating a simple meal, and the tray on the desk held two extra place settings.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon, and Draco Malfoy was safely home.

## Be Careful

### 83: What Question You Ask

A lie-in was putting it mildly—it was well past noon when Ginny finally awakened. Tonks put a finger to her lips as Ginny came down the stairs, pointing at the floor in front of the couch where she was sitting with Teddy. Ginny peered around the corner and had to stifle a laugh; Ron, Harry, and Hermione were all still asleep on the cushions, Harry with his face resting against Hermione's shoulder and Ron sprawled out below their feet.

“Remus says they haven't moved a bit since he came to bed last night,” Tonks said with a grin. “He's in the kitchen getting lunch together. Mum's out somewhere with Luna, as soon as they come back we'll put a Fidelius Charm over this place. I hadn't had a chance to ask you, how've you been? *Where've* you been? Those reports on *Potterwatch*, the ones by that Reflection kid, were they any good?”

“They were, but we never knew how.” Ginny sat down beside Tonks and stroked Teddy's hair, which was striped bubblegum pink and ultramarine at the moment. “It was nothing to do with us, at least I don't think it was, we never talked to anyone unless we were disguised...” One thought led to another. “Harry's not going to be happy about being here,” she said. “He didn't even want me along. He only let Ron and Hermione come in the first place because he knew there wasn't any way he could stop them.”

Tonks sighed. “Because the war's all his fault and he should take everything on himself, right? Never let anyone else share the danger? He's a great chap, but sometimes I just want to smack him upside the head, you know?”

“You're telling me,” Ginny said dryly, and this time Tonks had to hold back her laugh. “He finally agreed I could stay with them after I pointed out I hadn't exactly been safe at Hogwarts and I'd probably murder Mum if I had to go home and stay there. And it worked.” She scowled. “Right until I did magic and set off the damn Trace.”

“Did you do it on purpose?”

“No—well, sort of, Harry was about to say You-Know-Who's name, I wanted to stop him, and I did but it was accidental magic, wandless—”

“Quit blaming yourself.” Tonks tugged on a hank of Ginny's hair. “Accidental magic. You hear what I hear in there? Ac-cid-en-tal? As in, you didn't mean to?”

“It doesn’t matter that I didn’t mean to, Hermione’s still hurt! She’s lost her wand hand!”

“She can learn to use the other one. Trust me, I’ve seen it done.” Tonks’ voice was low and evenly paced, and Ginny found herself calming down almost against her will. “This is a war, Ginny. Means people get hurt, even die. Hermione knew what she was getting into, she could have gone away with her parents, and she didn’t. She took the risk. She’s still alive, she has her mind and her magic, and she has you and Harry and Ron to help her when she starts working with her left hand to get it good enough to fight with. Right?”

Ginny let out a reluctant sigh. “Right,” she agreed. “How did you get so smart?”

“Some of it, they train you for in Auror apprenticeship.” Tonks shifted Teddy to her other arm as he stirred. “Some of it I had to learn being married to Remus. I swear, that man knows every possible variation on blaming himself for things I’ve ever heard of, and a few I haven’t…”

“Talking about me?” said Lupin, coming into the living room with a tray levitating at the end of his wand.

“Of course,” Tonks said with a smile, pulling out her own wand and conjuring a small table for the tray to land on, then handing Teddy to his father. “What better subject is there?”

Ginny’s giggle at Lupin’s blush, or possibly the smell of the food on the tray, roused Ron, and before long two Weasleys and two Lupins were eating in companionable silence. Harry stirred a few times but did not wake, and Hermione remained as still as a statue save for the rise and fall of her chest with her breathing.

“Mum got a potion into both of them last night,” Tonks said when Ron started to look at the sleepers with concern. “They won’t starve. But you—” She pointed sternly at Ron with the hand not holding her sandwich. “—haven’t been taking care of them right.”

“Wha?” Ron said through a mouthful of crisps.

“Don’t give me that. You know what I’m talking about.” Tonks’ hair darkened with every word, as did her scowl. “As a fellow member of the Fraternity of Fun-Lovers, I say you have been derelict in your duty, sir! It was your job to keep them from taking themselves too seriously, and you’ve failed miserably!”

Ron stared at her open-mouthed for a second. Fortunately for Ginny’s stomach, he’d swallowed first. “Have you ever tried distracting Harry when he’s got his teeth into something?” he asked finally. “Or, Merlin forbid, Hermione? They’re like Hufflepuffs! You can’t shake them off! Mind you, it’s been better with Ginny around,” he added. “She can do more with Harry than I can. And I’m learning how to deal with Hermione. But what do you think I ought to have done?”

“I don’t know about ‘ought to,’” said Lupin, settling Teddy more firmly into the crook of his arm. “But if this is better for Harry, I’d hate to have seen worse. None of you look particularly well, I have to say. Too much worry and only yourselves to turn to.”

Tonks flicked a crisp at him. “As if you had any room to talk about that. Look, what’s done is done, and we can’t change it,” she said to Ron and Ginny. “But—notice I’m not asking for details, just an overview—whatever it is you’re up to, you’re getting close to the end, right? Whatever you’re looking for at Hogwarts, that’ll be the last of it?”

Ron gave a reluctant nod.

“Then you’ve got to get yourselves ready to do it right.” Tonks aimed her wand over her shoulder, and a scroll of parchment and a quill soared into her grasp. “Which means resting up and calming down. No, don’t try and tell me you’re calm already,” she cut Ron off as he started to speak. “You lot look unhappier than Snape in the shower.”

“How do you know what that looks like?” Ginny asked, as Ron seemed temporarily unable to speak.

Tonks pointed at Lupin, who gave Ginny a faint smirk. “I’m not necessarily proud of everything we got up to in school,” he said. “But I can’t deny some of it has remained quite amusing through the years, if mentally scarring.”

“As I was *saying*, you’re all wound up too tight.” Tonks mimed turning a key. “Harry, especially, looked like he was just about at breaking point last night. You need one place and time where you don’t have to think about the war or You-Know-Who or anything like that. Simply put, you need a party. And I know just the reason.” She smiled tenderly at Lupin, who returned the expression. “If a baby isn’t a decent excuse to whoop it up, what is? And you’re in charge,” she said, turning to Ron.

“Why me?” Ron said, frowning.

Tonks snorted. “I went to school with Bill and Charlie. Unless you’re going to tell me they never taught you anything about organizing a boozier...”

“I don’t think you should be drinking yet, dear,” Lupin objected.

“I never said I’d be drinking,” Tonks retorted. “But unless you can think of a better way to get them all relaxed for one night—”

Lupin sighed. “I had a feeling I wouldn’t survive this war,” he said. “If a Death Eater doesn’t kill me, Molly will, for allowing this. But all right.”

“We’ll protect you from Mum,” Ginny promised, waving her hand to encompass herself and her friends and brother. “Death Eaters...if we can.”

“Thank you,” Lupin said gravely. “I feel better already.”

“When were you thinking?” Ron said, leaning back against an armchair. “Tonight, tomorrow, whenever Hermione wakes up? Parties aren’t her thing, she wouldn’t mind if we did the drinking without her. Harry won’t want to miss it, though.”

“What?” Harry mumbled, lifting his head from Hermione’s shoulder.

“You won’t want to miss the party for Teddy,” said Ginny, slipping down to the floor to sit beside her boyfriend. “Will you?”

“Party sounds good.” Harry extracted his glasses from his front pocket and put them on, blinking muzzily behind them. “Morning,” he said to the group as a whole. “Do I smell food?”

“Sandwiches,” said Tonks, levitating the plate down to the floor where Harry could reach it. “Sooner the better, Ron. Tonight sounds fine.”

“In that case, I’d better get moving.” Ginny stood up. “That’s if you’re going to want food.”

“Oh, Mum can cook—”

“But if you’re offering, thank you and we accept,” Lupin interrupted his wife’s airy dismissal. “She might not care to have it sprung on her,” he murmured, before standing up and handing his son back to Tonks. “I’ll show you what we have in the kitchen, Ginny, and if there’s anything we need more of, I can pop out for it before we do the Fidelius.”

“What’s holding it up?” Harry asked, swallowing his first bite of sandwich. “I mean, not to be rude, but it’s no secret we’re connected with you. They’ll look here at some point.”

“Mrs. Tonks took Luna out for something,” said Ron. “We need to wait until they get back. Did they say how long they’d be?”

“Middle of the afternoon.” Tonks undid a flap on her robes one-handed as Teddy began to fuss. “So another hour or two. If they haven’t got at us yet, I doubt they’ll manage it in that amount of time. Bill helped us with our wards, used a couple of the curses he found in those Egyptian pyramids...”

Ginny snickered. “Do you think having two heads will make the Death Eaters any smarter?”

“They’ve got no brains to start with,” said Ron. “Two times nothing is still nothing.”

Harry grinned at this, looking more relaxed than Ginny had seen him—

*Since the day I showed up. Since that one moment he let himself forget about the war and just be glad to see me again.*

*Tonks was right. He needs this desperately. We all do. Time to put aside our fears for one night and be friends all together, celebrating a new life.*

But even as she followed Lupin into the kitchen to see what party foods she could create, Ginny found herself wondering where Andromeda Tonks had gone with Luna, and if it had anything to do with the mysterious Reflection.

---

Draco jabbed his quill into its holder and massaged his writing hand for a moment, leaning back to watch the lake water swirl outside the common room windows. Necessary this chore might be, but great fun it was not.

*But imagining people's faces when this all comes out...oh, that's fun if there ever was. Glad I'm going to be able to see the reality.*

He had spent the remainder of the previous day discussing with Moony and Danger the practicalities of his final journey to the otherworld, such as when he should undertake it. They both felt, and Draco reluctantly concurred, that it was too dangerous for him to simply come now and wait there for Harry to get around to killing the Dark Lord.

*What if I fell asleep at the wrong moment and got stuck over here? Or what if it turns out Harry actually needs my help with something—like that last Horcrux? No, I have to stay involved if I want this to come out well. Besides, Luna'd never leave her friends, and I'm not about to leave her.*

Thoughts of Luna produced a wave of longing, which he shoved back as best he could. He had seen her yesterday by the calendar, and even by his personal time they'd only been apart for one full day. There was no reason he should feel this lost and disoriented without her, no reason he should want to see her and hear her voice so badly...

The fire in the fireplace flared green, and Snape's voice echoed out of it. "Malfoy?"

"Yes, sir," Draco answered quickly, standing up.

"Get your cloak and come to my office."

"On my way, sir." Draco pulled his wand and Summoned his outdoor cloak from his dorm, fastened it under his chin, and stepped into the flames, holding the fabric in both hands to keep it from catching so much ash that it pulled him out at a different grate than the one he intended.

*Where's he going to take me—or send me?*

A few seconds later, he stepped clear of the Headmaster's fireplace, shaking ashes out of his hair. Snape and a brunette witch were waiting for him; Draco's eyes widened as he saw her.

"Draco, I don't believe you know—" Snape began.

"Aunt Andromeda," Draco cut him off, bowing.

"Nephew," his aunt answered formally. She looked older than Aunt Andy, Draco noticed, probably because her life had been harder, especially over the last year. "I hope you are well."

"Tolerably so." No acting was required for the tremble in Draco's voice, nor for the need to look away from the eyes surprisingly like his mother's.

“I beg your pardon,” Snape said. “I was not aware you’d met.”

“We haven’t,” said Draco, looking up at the Headmaster. “Call it...a lucky guess.”

Aunt Andromeda chuckled. “I’ve come to see if you would care to spend an hour or two in Hogsmeade with me,” she said. “It is Saturday, and the middle of your Easter holidays, so I cannot imagine you have much to do. And I think we might find a few topics of conversation we would both enjoy.”

“I have no objection,” said Snape. “Though obviously you must return by sundown.”

“Of course.” Draco inclined his head to his former Potions professor. “Thank you, sir.”

*Here’s hoping I can pay you back sometime.*

---

The walk towards Hogwarts’ gates was silent. Aunt Andromeda broke it first. “Please believe I share your sorrow, Draco. Whatever our differences of opinion, I loved your mother dearly.”

“I know.” Draco pulled his hood up against the whipping wind. “She never mentioned you, but I think that was because she missed you too much to talk about it.”

“A generous interpretation. I thank you.” Another moment of silence. “I have good news of my own, though I hesitate to bring it up at such a time.”

“No, please, don’t. I could do with some good news for once.”

Aunt Andromeda smiled warmly. “Then I will tell you that you have a new cousin. My grandson was born last night.”

“Congratulations!” Draco returned her smile, thinking fondly of Aurora Black, now sitting up on her own and learning to crawl (as yet she could only go backwards, which frustrated her immensely), and Jenny Beauvoi, grabbing at anything that offered itself and laughing with abandon if it flinched back or yelled. “What has he been named?”

“Teddy.” Aunt Andromeda’s voice went soft. “For my husband.”

Draco shut his eyes, momentarily transported back to a snow-filled clearing and a hand gone limp in his grasp. “May he grow to be as good a man as his namesake,” he said, and realized a second too late he might have given himself away. *She wasn’t supposed to know...it was meant to stay a secret...*

But Aunt Andromeda’s smile changed not one whit, and she steered the conversation deftly into the myriad perfections of the new baby as they walked down the lane to Hogsmeade and into the barroom of the Hog’s Head. The barman nodded towards the stairs, and Draco climbed them, his aunt behind him. Both of them had fallen silent as they approached the building.

*Why are we here?*

“This one,” Aunt Andromeda said quietly, pointing to the closed door of room seven. “Go right in and stay there until I return.” Her lips quirked for a moment. “I doubt you will have trouble finding occupation.”

And she turned and went back down the stairs, leaving Draco staring alternately at her and the door. After a few seconds, he shook himself out of his bemusement and turned the doorknob.

*Here goes nothing...*

The room beyond was dimly lit. One person sat on the bed, wearing a hooded cloak like Draco’s own. Hands went to the hood and lowered it.

“Close the door,” murmured the voice he’d been wanting most to hear. “And then come here.”

Numbly, Draco obeyed, and Luna drew him close and held him as he began once again to cry. How and why, where and when, could be addressed later. For now, he had who and what he needed, and he was, in a strange way, content.

## Be Careful

### 84: Whom You Discuss

Harry sat beside Hermione, watching her sleep. His hair was damp from his first real shower in months, and he could smell faint hints of whatever Ginny was fixing in the kitchen. The sound of running water from upstairs told him Ron was making use of the shower now, and he'd seen Tonks and Lupin lying side by side on their bed, fast asleep, with Teddy on Tonks' chest, his hair rippling from brown to blond as he rose and fell with her breathing.

*This is all I want. All I've ever wanted. Friends, a family, whatever you want to call them, but people to share my life with. But I can't have it, or not for long. Not without the damned war getting in the way...*

A faint noise from the door made him look around, drawing his wand. Andromeda stepped inside, nodding in approval when she saw him ready to defend. "My daughter is a Metamorphmagus who wed a werewolf and named their son for my husband," she said softly, hanging up her cloak as Luna followed her in. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yeah, you're you," Harry said, lowering his wand. "Did you finish your—Luna, what's *that*?"

Ginny, who had come out of the kitchen at the noise of the door opening, made a soft sound of wonder at the furry gray tube hanging around Luna's shoulders. "You found your friend from the Forest again!"

"No, he found me." Luna stroked one end of the tube, and it lifted up, revealing a predator's head with two small, intelligent eyes. "His name is Luke. He's a mongoose, Harry," she added in his direction. "A snake killer."

"I like him already." Harry got up and went over to Luna, offering his hand to the little creature. Luke sniffed Harry's fingers, then sneezed and shook his head.

"Bless you," Harry said. "What was this about the Forest?"

"That's where Luke and I first met, back in the fall." Luna hung up her own cloak as Ginny scratched between Luke's ears in greeting. "When we had our week of detention with Hagrid, Luke was there the very first night."

"It sounds silly, but I felt like it was a sign," Ginny said, letting Luke rub his nose against her

thumb. “I wanted to give up, to stop fighting You-Know-Who and the Slytherins, and here comes an animal that’s famous for going after snakes. How could I ignore that?”

“You couldn’t.” Harry squeezed her hand. “And I’m glad you didn’t. But where were you, that he could find you again?” he asked Luna.

“My errand had several parts, the first of which was in Hogsmeade,” Andromeda answered. “And do I smell something burning?”

“Oh no, my scones!” Ginny ran for the kitchen, her hand going towards her wand pocket before sheering off with a quiver of frustration. Harry quickly followed; he might not be able to return her wand before the Fidelius went up and made her impossible to Trace, but he could do whatever magic she needed done.

*So Luna’s friend is a snake killer.* He cleared the few traces of smoke from the kitchen air with a quick Freshening Charm as Ginny yanked the oven open. *Wonder if I should ask him for tips?*

“These don’t look too bad,” Ginny said, setting down the baking trays on the stove. “Just a little scorched, and I can scrape those bits off. Thank you for noticing,” she said to Andromeda, who had come into the kitchen with them.

“You’re welcome.” Andromeda held out her hand with a sly smile. “I do charge a fee, though.”

Ginny laughed and pointed at one of the prettiest scones, and Harry blew cool air across it with his wand, then picked it up and handed it to Andromeda. “Did you get your errand done?” he asked.

Andromeda tore the scone in half with one brisk motion. “Yes indeed,” she said, sniffing the steam which rose from the inside. “My sister—my remaining sister—is thoroughly cautioned against reducing our family any further than it has already been.”

“That sounds ominous,” said Ginny, turning off the oven. “Can you tell us what you did, or shouldn’t I ask?”

“You may ask.”

“What did you do?” Harry said when the silence seemed likely to stretch into minutes.

“I laid a simple spell of congruence over my daughter and her uncles.” Andromeda transferred the half-scone in her right hand to her left, in order to draw her wand and conjure a pot of jam onto the table. “If Nymphadora dies in this war, or her son, or his father, so will Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle.”

Harry stared at his hostess, who was nonchalantly spreading jam across her scone. He had never been quite so aware that Andromeda had been born on the other side of the battle lines as they were currently drawn.

*Would I do that? Could I? Even to Bellatrix or Snape or Voldemort, could I do something as*

*drastic as that? And to people who weren't even involved?*

*But let's be honest, they're Death Eaters, and some of the worst around. They're the reason Neville's parents don't know him, they've probably killed more Muggles than there are people in this house, they deserve this if anyone does.*

*And it isn't my decision anyway.*

Footsteps thumped on the stairs in time with someone whistling "Weasley Is Our King," which tune cut off abruptly with a gasp. "*Hermione!*"

At the tone in Ron's voice, Harry shot out the kitchen door, just in time to see his two best friends hugging each other so tightly their robes seemed in danger of meshing. Luna stood a few paces away, smiling to herself and stroking the head of Luke the mongoose, who was rubbing his cheek against her fingers on each pass. Behind him, Ginny sighed in relief, and Harry felt her arms go around his waist. He put his hand over hers and drew her up beside him, and together they joined the group by the fireplace.

"Room for a couple more?" Ginny inquired.

"Of course." Hermione's voice was hoarse but clear, and her smile as Ron let her go was nearly dazzling. "Harry, I'm so glad you're all right—I guess you were able to keep him from doing anything too insane, Ginny—"

"Actually she had to talk me into doing something insane," Harry said, sitting down and hugging Hermione in his turn. "Or at least weird. I killed a wall so we could get to you." He glanced at Hermione's right arm, the sleeve hanging over where her hand had been so that she looked almost normal. "I'm only sorry I wasn't quicker."

"What, this?" Hermione pulled her own sleeve up. "Harry, you couldn't have been quick enough for this. It would have had to happen anyway."

"Would have had to—" Harry couldn't finish the sentence. "*Why?*"

"She cut it on the sword, tossing it over to you," said Ron. "And what's the sword got in?"

Harry hammered the heel of his left hand into his forehead, just over his scar. "Basilisk venom. Stupid me." *But that just makes it my fault another way, because she never would have had to throw it if I hadn't started saying that name and made Ginny do magic—*

"Stop it," Hermione snapped, pointing at him. "Stop it now."

"Stop what? I'm not doing anything."

"Oh yes you are. I've seen that look on your face before. It's your 'I am responsible for everything that goes wrong' look, and you are not responsible for this, do you understand me?" Hermione glared at him. "You might as well say that I'm responsible for you getting hurt on Christmas Eve

because I was the one who said we should go to Godric's Hollow. It was an accident, Harry. No one's fault, not really. Or mine if it is. And I'm not going to let it stop me, so neither are you, understand?"

Harry saluted her. "Yes ma'am."

"Look who's awake," said Lupin's voice from the stairs. He was carrying Teddy, and Hermione gasped in delight at the sight of the baby. "Glad to see you up, Hermione. And you two safely home," he said to Andromeda and Luna. "I'll work the Fidelius, then, shall I?"

"Please do." Andromeda had a slight smile on her face as she gazed at Luna. Harry wondered for a moment what was so funny, but watching Hermione coo over Teddy as Lupin laid the baby in her arms took precedence.

"Would any of you care to watch?" Lupin added. "It's an intricate charm, but it doesn't take very long, and it might be useful to you down the line."

"I would," said Harry. He'd been curious about the exact mechanics of a Fidelius Charm ever since he'd learned of its existence, and its significance to him, in his third year at Hogwarts. "Hermione?"

"What?" Hermione looked up from Teddy. "Oh, the Fidelius, yes, I'd love to watch—" She broke off, frowning. "But I'll ask you about it later," she finished. "Right now I don't want to think too much."

Harry exchanged puzzled glances with Ginny. He'd never seen Hermione unwilling to think.

*But I've never seen Hermione after she's been tortured, either. That might account for it.*

He got to his feet and followed Lupin into a small back room, and shut the door behind him.

It was time he learned how to make sure his family and friends were protected.

---

"All right, what was that for?" Hermione demanded of Ron. "I've wanted to see a Fidelius being worked forever! Why did you flick me?"

"We need to talk." Ron waved a hand around the group. "Us four. It's important."

"More important than the charm that's going to keep us all safe?" The last word rose sharply, and Teddy startled awake in Hermione's arms and began to cry.

"Here, let me have him," said Andromeda, coming forward to take her grandson from an apologetic-looking Hermione. "I doubt I am wanted here at the moment anyway."

"We're not trying to chase you out," Ron began.

“No, but what you plan to discuss will do better without me.” Andromeda started up the stairs, patting Teddy’s back as she went. “I will be within call if I am needed.”

“So what’s so important that we talk about?” Ginny asked, drawing her knees up to her chin. “And without Harry?”

“Draco Malfoy.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds. Luna sat down and lifted Luke down into her lap, where he curled up with a soft, amused-sounding chitter.

“Somebody has to start,” Ron added. “Luna, how about you? Care to explain what I saw you doing with him?”

“You make it sound so dirty.” Luna stroked between Luke’s ears. “We’re allowed, you know. It goes with being engaged.”

“Engaged?” Ginny blurted. “But I thought you and Reflection—”

“Reflection *is* Draco Malfoy,” Hermione cut in. “I’ve known that since January. You remember, Ginny, the day you joined us, when I said I’d been delayed? He delayed me.” She glanced once at Luke. “But not to hurt me or scare me. To ask me for a favor.”

“What favor?” Ginny asked.

“I...” Hermione flushed. “I copied a few of your memories. Not personal ones!” she added quickly as Ginny sat up straighter. “Only what happened with you and Zabini, and then how you got out of the castle and Harry rescued you! It was only so no one would think you’d been kidnapped by someone else trying to do the same as Zabini, it couldn’t tell anyone anything they didn’t already know!”

“You gave Draco Malfoy my sister’s memories?” Ron said in shock. “Why the hell did you think you could trust him?”

“Two reasons.” Hermione started to hold up her right arm, then switched to her left. “First was what he did to you when he’d caught you. You said yourself, he almost seemed concerned for you. And why should he turn you into me? It made no sense. Unless...”

Ginny exhaled in understanding. “Unless he didn’t want to ruin your story,” she said to her brother. “Unless he wanted everyone to keep thinking you were dying at home.”

Ron nodded half-reluctantly. “Go on,” he said to Hermione. “What’s the other reason?”

“He gave me his word,” Hermione said simply. “He promised me that he wouldn’t let them be used against us.”

“And you trust that?” Ron sounded deeply skeptical.

“To the purebloods who live by the old rules, a promise has magic of its own,” Luna said, tracing patterns in Luke’s fur with her fingers. “They’ll lie and cheat to get ahead in a second, but once they give their word, they never break it. Not even to a Muggleborn.”

“Honor among thieves,” Ron muttered. “Great.”

“What about you?” Luna looked up at Ron. “You told him what was wrong with Hermione. You trusted him with her life.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t have much choice. Somebody had to stop that venom from spreading before...” Ron’s voice seized up, and he grasped Hermione’s hand tightly. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I wish it could have been me instead.”

“I know.” Hermione stroked the back of Ron’s hand with her fingers. “It will be all right in the end, Ron. I promise.” A smile flitted across her lips. “Even though I’m not a pureblood.”

## Be Careful 85: Which Parts You Speak

Luke the mongoose followed his nose upstairs to the bedroom where his aunt sat watching over her sleeping daughter and grandson. She raised inquisitive eyebrows as he took his human form and shut the door. “I had thought you would want to listen.”

“They’re trying to work out the chronology of it now.” Draco arched his back, stretching his shoulders, which always felt stiff after a stint in his Animagus form. “Put together everything I’ve done, every time they’ve seen me or been affected by me. Since I know it all already, it got boring. So here I am.” He held out his arms and plastered a hopeful expression on his face. “May I?”

“Be careful with his head,” Aunt Andromeda warned, getting up. “His neck—”

“Isn’t strong enough to support it yet, I know.” Draco sat down in the chair and accepted little Teddy, cradling a white-tufted head in the crook of his arm. “Really getting into the Metamorphmagic, isn’t he?”

“He likely enjoys having one thing wholly under his control.” Aunt Andromeda was watching him with the steady, exploring gaze of a Healer. “You are not what I expected, Draco.”

“If I had a Knut for every time someone’s said that to me this year...” Draco shrugged minutely, so as not to disturb the sleeping baby. “Not that I need the money.”

Aunt Andromeda smiled. “True enough. Is the answer to the conundrum anything which can be explained in the time we have?”

“Probably not. But I’m working on making sure it gets explained to everyone involved before this is all over.” *Which number has just gone up by three, four if you count Teddy. But that won’t be too big a problem, I don’t think.*

“Then I shall wait.” She leaned on the back of the chair, regarding Teddy’s face as it crinkled in sleep and his hair began to blush red. “As shall we all.”

Her right hand rested for a moment on Teddy’s forehead. Draco frowned. Had he, or had he not, seen her thumb move in the otherworld’s sign of protection?

*That has to stay a ‘maybe’. I didn’t get a clear look. But—*

The hand rose to Draco's own forehead and flicked a few strands of hair back to their proper places. The side of the thumb brushed against his skin, two quick strokes at right angles.

*That's no maybe, and no accident either. I have a few questions I need to be asking Mum tomorrow...*

Those two thoughts, 'Mum' and 'tomorrow,' sent Draco's mind hurtling in enough directions to be at right angles to itself, and he heard the footsteps outside the room only just in time. Aunt Andromeda snatched up Teddy and Luke the mongoose darted under the bed as a soft knock sounded on the door.

*Better stay under here until no one's looking, then slip out and back down to Luna.*

"Are you finished, then?" Aunt Andromeda's voice asked. "We are protected?"

"As safe as can be," Lupin answered. "No one who isn't already here will be able to find us unless I tell them where."

Luke muffled his sniggers in his tail.

"We've worked out a spell to use on ourselves for the party, too," Harry added. "A variant on the Tongue-Tying Jinx. It'll make sure we don't say anything by accident that we shouldn't."

"Like certain names?" Aunt Andromeda said dryly. "Not that I think even a Trace could defeat a Fidelius, but I would prefer not to wager my life on it."

Luke risked taking a peek. Harry's color was rising, but he was holding his temper in check admirably.

"Andromeda, please," said Lupin in mild reproof. "Let's not quarrel tonight."

*What a good idea.*

Luke slipped out from under the bed and shot between Harry and the lintel of the door, already halfway down the stairs before he heard Lupin say, "What was that?"

*That, my dear professor, was your biggest security risk.*

*Not that you know that, or ever will.*

*At least, not until there's no more need for security.*

---

"Malfoy may have called what I said about Hermione's hand melodrama, but he listened anyway," Ron said. Two cups of the punch he'd mixed with Tonks' help had taken the rough edges off the world, so that his only problem was sticking to the story he and Hermione had worked out for Harry and the Lupins about what had happened in, and to, Malfoy Manor.

*Hermione's got a harder job than I do. Everything Malfoy did for me, I can pin on Luna.*

“Obviously,” said Harry, slurring the word just a touch. He was working on his fourth cup of punch, though Ginny was keeping him well-supplied with food to offset it. “How did you get free, and downstairs? And what about a wand?”

“Luna cut me loose after Malfoy shoved me in with her.” Ron grinned at the girl, who looked up from her lap-mongoose and returned the expression. “And she, or maybe I should say her friend Reflection, found these little amulet things. Have a look.” He unlooped the cord from his neck and handed it to Harry. “That one’s dead, I used it up, but I think Luna’s is still live—”

“Two more uses,” Luna clarified. “I used the first one getting out to the boundaries quickly.”

“What does it do?” Lupin asked, leaning closer to see.

“It changes you into your Animagus form,” said Ron. “Even if you don’t know what it is. Mine’s a hawk, so all I had to do to get down to the ground was glide.” The experience of flying with his own wings was not one he was going to forget in a hurry, even if the first few seconds had been sheer terror. “Luna had to shove me out the window, though. I wouldn’t’ve gone otherwise.”

Tonks snorted in amusement, Harry and Ginny laughed aloud, and Lupin’s lips twitched. “Is your form winged as well?” he asked Luna.

“A snowy owl.” Luna passed her empty cup to Tonks, who was the official guardian of the punch bowl. “The amulets have been very useful.”

“I’d imagine.” Harry stole a piece of Ginny’s cheese, narrowly dodging her smack. “How’d you meet this Reflection, anyway? Does he really look like Hermione?”

“Where did you hear that?”

Harry pointed to Lupin, who shrugged. “It was the way Dean described him to me,” he said, handing his own cup to Tonks for a refill. “‘As if Hermione had a brother,’ was the way he put it.”

Hermione laughed aloud this time. “To hear Draco talk, you’d think I did,” she said. “And he was it. I can’t imagine why he’d set his heart on me like that...”

“I can,” said Luna, taking another slice of apple and breaking it in half for Luke. “I got to know him well, staying at his house so long. I even know things about him he doesn’t know himself.”

“For example?” said Andromeda, sitting in a chair a few feet back from the main circle of the party, but with a cup of punch and a plate of food beside her.

“He’s always wanted to be friends with Hermione.” Luna popped the other piece of apple into her own mouth. “It’s part of the reason he was so horrible to you all the time at school,” she said around it. “And to you two,” she added to Harry and Ron. “He was envious of you, because you could be near her and he couldn’t.”

“Not without betraying everything his family stood for,” Tonks said. “So he kept niggling at it in his head until he found some way he could be around her. Sounds properly pureblood to me.”

“Malfoy’s a little bit mad. We knew that.” Harry drained his cup and handed it over. Ron noticed Tonks murmur a charm over it before she gave it back, and hoped it had removed some of the alcohol. “What about Reflection? What’s he to the Malfoys? What’s he to Hermione, for that matter?”

“To Hermione, and all of you, a friend,” said Luna. “To the Malfoys, a relation they didn’t care for. They never turned him out, but they never did much for him either, so he was quite lonely by the time we met. He can wear a lot of different faces—it’s part of the reason he chose the name he did for *Potterwatch*—so he picked one for Dean that he thought Dean would trust.”

*All of it true, and none of it coming near the whole truth.* Ron hid a smile in a bite of scone. *Luna, you’re a star.*

“All right, so we’ve got Luna down at the wards with Harry and Ginny,” said Tonks, sketching a rough map in the air with her wand. “And because Reflection’s connected somehow to the Malfoys and you’re engaged to him, you had a little bit of power over them. Enough to get past.”

Luna nodded. “We’d hoped I could let Harry and Ginny back in, but it didn’t work like that.”

“Not surprised. And we’ve got Ron coming in from outside, where he meets Wormtail and gets his wand off him.” Tonks added a few stars and squiggles coming off the little cloud in the hallway that signified the fight. “And Hermione in this front room, with my wonderful cousin Draco, his mummy and daddy and auntie, and Fenrir Greyback and his gang of Snatchers...”

She trailed off, looking significantly at Hermione, as was everyone else.

*You can do it,* Ron willed his girlfriend silently. *Stay as close to the truth as you can and you should be fine.*

“I don’t really know what happened,” Hermione said, crumbling a crisp between her fingers. “Draco kept talking and talking, all about how he would make me believe he was my friend, and then my brother, and you know what’s frightening? I would have. If he’d done what he talked about, I would have believed him.”

Harry made a rude noise. “Come on, Hermione, we all know better than that. You, believe Malfoy’s your brother? I’ll believe Wormtail’s a hero before that!”

“He had some good points, Harry.” Hermione met Harry’s gaze calmly. “Maybe not good right now, when I know that they’re coincidence and pureblood cant, but if he had Obliviated me, if he had been able to take advantage of Stockholm Syndrome—that’s what happens sometimes in hostage situations, when the hostages start to think well of the people holding them,” she added for the benefit of the purebloods in the room. “If he had been friendly enough, and I had been there long enough, I would have been desperate for a connection to anyone or anything. Even

Draco Malfoy.”

“What made you scream?” Ginny asked. “We heard you all the way down at the boundaries.”

“He threatened my parents.” Hermione stared into her punch. “He said I would kill them, on his orders, and that would ‘purify’ my blood.” The sneer quotes were nearly tangible. “And that I would smile as I did it. That made me angry, angrier than I’ve ever been. I screamed. And the floor started shaking.”

“Not just the floor,” said Harry. “The ground outside, the whole house, everything was moving.”

“Quite a powerful voice,” Lupin commented.

“Yes, but it wasn’t mine.” Hermione looked up. “Not the scream, that was mine, but the voice with the power. This is going to sound utterly mad, but I heard someone speak to me while I was screaming, just as clearly as I can hear any of you.”

“What did they say?” asked Tonks, who looked fascinated. “‘Good scream, keep it up?’”

“Something like that.” Hermione smiled wanly. “And then it told me to command it, to tell it what I wanted done—‘who you wish crushed,’ was the way it was put—and I did.”

“And as a result, my oh-so-dear sister Bellatrix is in St. Mungo’s and will not be leaving there for at least a week,” said Andromeda smugly. “I visited her there, as part of my errand. She looks most uncomfortable, and is taking it out on her husband and brother-in-law.”

“My heart bleeds for them,” said Ron, getting a refill on his own punch. “We already know the Malfoys made it out, though You-Know-Who did for one of them later...” He realized an instant too late how callous this sounded. “Sorry,” he said to Andromeda over his shoulder.

Andromeda shook her head. “Never apologize for reminding us where the true blame lies in these deaths.” She seemed to be directing her words past him, and Ron followed her line of sight with his eyes and came up with—

*Luna? But that’s ridiculous, Luna wouldn’t blame herself for Mrs. Malfoy dying... so then who...*

“What about the Snatchers?” Ginny asked, taking over the conversation. “Harry, you said you saw Greyback?”

“He was badly burned, but if they bother to take care of him he’ll probably live.” Harry glanced apologetically at Lupin, who sipped his punch as though this topic bothered him not at all. “The other Snatchers... I don’t think any of them got out. Or Wormtail.”

“I didn’t want to kill anyone,” Hermione whispered, her eyes on her feet. “I just wanted to get away.”

Luke the mongoose scurried out of Luna’s lap and into Hermione’s, where he sat up and delivered

himself of what sounded like an entire lecture in chitter, complete with a scolding paw shaken under Hermione's nose. By the time he finished, everyone was laughing, even Hermione.

"Thank you," she said, handing Luke back to Luna. "You're right. I never killed anyone. I knocked some walls down on top of people, but that was to keep them from stopping us escaping, not to kill them. The house falling was outside my control, and not everyone who was trapped inside died."

"And if Lucius had helped Narcissa instead of pulling her away, perhaps they could have saved everyone," Luna added. "But no one is ever told what would have happened." She smiled her special smile, the one Ron associated with some pronouncement about the upcoming lead article of *The Quibbler*. "Except sometimes they are."

Luke nuzzled her hand, then yipped in surprise. Startled, Ron looked up. The light outside was fading.

*When did it get so late?*

"Yes, you had better go," Luna said, exactly as if Luke had spoken. "Come back soon. I miss you when you're not here."

"Go?" said Harry, frowning. "Luna, what's..." He trailed off as Luna stood up and went to the door, opening it. Luke shot out through it, and Luna closed it again.

"Luke comes and goes as he pleases," she said, returning to her place. "Don't worry. He won't give us away."

The round of laughter had a brittle edge to Ron's ear. If what he was starting to suspect was true, then Luke *could* give them away.

*But if it's true what we worked out while Lupin and Harry were doing the Fidelius, then he won't. He's on our side now.*

Ron was glad he wasn't going to have to be the one to try and convince Harry of this. He had the feeling, somehow, that it would likely be a losing battle.

## Be Careful

### 86: Whose Voice You Hear

Draco Apparated into the alley behind the Hog's Head in the last red light of sunset, his wand already in his hand. Shutting his eyes for a second, he concentrated on the moment Hermione had awakened in response to his whispered promise.

*“Expecto patronum! ”*

The silver owl erupted from the end of his wand and fluttered ahead of him as he hurried around the building to the street beyond, rehearsing his story to himself. *We got to talking about Mother and lost track of time. Aunt Andromeda went straight home, she said she trusted me to get back to the school alone, and here I am, all safe and sound...*

A four-legged Patronus came into view at the end of the street, and Draco's owl turned in a flurry of silver feathers and flew to meet it. Draco followed, squinting to make out what animal the other was. *Too delicate for a horse, and who'd have a cow Patronus? No antlers, though, so it can't be a stag like Harry's...*

“Draco?” called Snape's voice from around the corner.

“Here, sir,” Draco called back, fighting down a grin of delight as he recognized the delicate creature lifting her head to investigate his owl. “I'm sorry I'm late, we had a lot of stories to tell each other.”

*And I'll have a good one to tell Mum in the morning, along with all I've got to ask her.*

*I wonder if she knows about this?*

---

Back at the Tonkses', the party had grown more raucous. Remus, into whose punch Hermione suspected Tonks had been slipping the alcohol she was removing from Harry's, was reprising his role as teacher, though the current subject had never been on any official Hogwarts curriculum. Still, no one was surprised that the last survivor of the Marauders knew a great many bawdy songs and ribald jokes, and judging by the grin on Tonks' face, she had orchestrated the celebration in part for this exact reason.

*And I am grateful. I haven't heard Harry laugh this hard in ages.*

But around the time Remus started giving Harry and Ron the male lines of a song about the goings-on of fictitious royalty of England, Spain, and France, to alternate with the female lines as sung by Ginny and Tonks, Hermione exchanged glances with Luna and the two of them excused themselves. Andromeda motioned them towards the same back room Remus had used earlier for performing the Fidelius, and Luna cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door before sitting down across from Hermione. “What is it you want to know?” she asked.

“I...” Hermione floundered for a moment before seizing on one question that needed an answer immediately. “Has he really always wanted to be my friend?”

“Oh, yes.” Luna’s eyes closed for a moment to see a happy memory. “He couldn’t admit it even to himself until this year, but he was always impressed by how good your magic is, and by how smart you are. You’re quite right that your birthdates are just a coincidence, but it’s an interesting one, don’t you think?”

“It is.” Hermione rubbed her right wrist, trying to think of how she could phrase her next question without seeming rude. The words to which she had awakened had given her enough hope to behave normally for the intervening hours, but now she was beginning to have her doubts. “Luna, I know purebloods keep their word, but...”

“If he doesn’t help you, I won’t stay with him,” Luna said firmly. “I do love him, but I couldn’t marry anyone who didn’t keep a promise that important.” She smiled. “But he will keep it, so I don’t have to worry. He won’t be able to bring it with him here, though, so it will have to wait until we all go to Hogwarts, and that probably won’t be until the end of the month.”

Hermione nodded, tempering her reawakening hope with caution. This was, after all, Luna Lovegood she was talking to.

*But she, or she and Draco together, got the Horcrux out of Gringotts and sent it to us, with the basilisk fang that destroyed the locket. She helped save Dean from the Snatchers, and she showed Harry and Ginny how to bring down the wards so Ron and I could escape. She may believe odd things on her own time, but when it comes to the war she seems well-focused...*

A rapping on the door made them both jump. Luna removed the charm and unlocked the door with her wand. “Come in!” she called.

Andromeda opened the door on a burst of singing mixed with giggles from Ginny and Tonks.

*Now the Queen of Spain was an amorous dame  
And a lusty wench was she...*

“May I take refuge in here with you?” the older witch inquired over the next lines. “I fear this is becoming the sort of party my mother warned me about.”

“Please, do come in,” Hermione said, as Harry, Ron, and Remus began their answer, Ron’s guffaws rising over the off-key singing.

*So she sent a royal message with a royal messenger  
To ask the King of England...*

Slipping in, Andromeda shut the door on the following words. “Thank you,” she said, replacing the Imperturbable Charm. “I enjoy ribald humor occasionally, but I have had my fill for tonight.”

“Yes, me too, but it’s so good to see them happy again.” Hermione leaned back in her chair. “It reminds me of the parties they used to have after Quidditch games...”

Stories of the Trio’s Hogwarts escapades, Luna and Draco’s theatrical misadventures, and Tonks’ childhood mishaps filled up the next few hours effortlessly. Outside observers would have been hard put to say which of the two parties had more fun that night.

Not that they didn’t try, of course.

---

Draco awakened all at once, and let out a silent sigh of relief as he saw the yellow strip of cloth inside his bedcurtains. *Home again, home again. Saturday again, too. Not that it matters so much during holidays...*

*But then again, it might.*

He got up, pulled on the first set of robes that came to hand, and headed for the Great Hall, noticing in passing that no one else seemed to be up. *Must be pretty early. No matter, the house-elves are always awake. I’ll have some breakfast and ask one of them to take a message to London for me.*

Up the stairs, across the entrance hall, through the doors, and Draco stopped short, a smile coming unconsciously to his face. No message would be needed. Near the end of the Slytherin table sat Healer Cecilia Black, reading from a slender book held in her left hand, a forkful of eggs neglected in her right.

He hadn’t made any sound, or he thought he hadn’t, but she looked up and saw him, and her face brightened. For that one instant, she looked exactly like his mother, like Narcissa when she’d seen him alive and mostly unhurt—Narcissa, who would stop being alive herself in only a few moments—

Mum was beside him as though by magic, her arms around him, holding him close. “My love,” she murmured, “my love, here I am, hold onto me...”

“I couldn’t save her,” he whispered back, holding on as he’d been ordered, feeling the hot sting of more tears in his eyes. “I couldn’t. I didn’t even know what he was going to do.”

“She would not have wanted you to save her,” Mum said with total certainty. “Not if it meant your own life.”

“We could have found some other way...”

“Not in the time and the situation that you had.” She guided him to the bench and helped him sit down beside her. “She made her choice. Never dishonor it by second-guessing her. Though I will admit, since the choice was among the three of you—”

“What?” Draco scrubbed the back of his right hand across his eyes and stared at his mum. “The three of us?”

“Your father, your mother, and yourself. Did you not know?”

Draco shook his head slowly, feeling the muscles beneath his breastbone begin to tighten.

“Severus told me so, and I confirmed it for myself by watching the scene.” Mum rested her hand on his shoulder. “He also told me that he saw qualities in you that night he has never seen before. Based on that, and on what he knew of your parents, he expressed some slight pity for Lucius, if only for having so little wit that he could not weigh the members of his family at their true worth.”

“Couldn’t figure out he was the least valuable, you mean.” Draco barely knew his own voice. It seemed to come from miles away, from some snowbank on the mountains high above the school.

“Yes, I do.”

The knot of muscle was large enough to hurt, but Draco found enough breath for four words, forced around his tight-clenched teeth. “I will kill him.”

“No.”

The tone penetrated Draco’s anger-filled trance and made him look around in surprise. Mum was sitting very straight, and her eyes sparked as they met his. “I would have my son neither a murderer nor a fool. Do you not see? Can you not understand? He walks through hell every day of his life, as surely as though he were already under the sway of the dementors!”

*Already? She must mean Azkaban... but we don’t have that here, not the same way they do where I came from...*

A chill ran down Draco’s spine. *Who is this talking to me?*

“Do not kill him, but pray that he lives a long life,” the voice went on inexorably, “for he will suffer a million times more through that life than he would in the one moment of terror before his death.” Her smile mingled superior knowledge and smug satisfaction. “After his death, of course, is another matter altogether, but leave that to me. Your best revenge is to let him live to see his master defeated, and to give him to know that you were the agent of that defeat. Can you do that, my son?”

“I think I can manage that much,” Draco drawled in his best pureblood tones. “Mother.”

“Good.” Blue eyes closed, and the woman beside him exhaled a long sigh. “Well,” she said after a moment’s silence. “That was unusual.”

“Oh, you mean you’re not used to being taken over by ghosts?” Draco purposely made his voice as astonished as possible, and got a laugh for his troubles. “Used as an otherworldly courier service? I never would have guessed!”

“Bothersome brat.” Mum swatted his shoulder lightly. “Now, were you looking for me for some purpose, or did you simply want my company?”

“Your company, first of all.” Draco leaned into her side for a moment, then sat up. “But I had some questions about... you know. Things.” He directed his eyes towards the door behind the high table, then sketched the sign of protection on the tabletop. “This, for one. Is there any way someone in the world I came from could know about it?”

“Yes, indeed. Several.” Mum stood up and beckoned him to follow her. “Shall we talk about that over breakfast, and continue the conversation elsewhere when we are finished?”

“Sounds good to me.”

---

Late that same afternoon, Draco leaned against the wide lip of a small fountain made from white marble, watching water spill from the higher basin down a miniature flight of stairs into the lower. Above him soared what would have been a vaulted ceiling if it had not shared the enchantment of the Great Hall, which lay just beyond the door, to show the soft blue of the spring sky. Nearby, Aurora Black burred cheerfully to herself, waving her hands through the different-colored puddles of light among which she sat.

Draco picked up the leatherbound book lying beside him and read the page he had marked once again. The tradition it described, and that to which this room was dedicated, was older than any he had grown up with, though he could see its stamp on many of the things the purebloods of his original world took for granted.

*And it makes sense of Aunt Andromeda knowing it. She was born pureblood, but she’s good, and this is really just a way of declaring yourself for the good side of things. Promising you’ll fight evil the best you can, both in the world around you and in your own heart.*

Draco watched as Professor Riddle entered the room by a small door to one side and draped a white cloth over the table which sat on the dais in the front. After making a respectful bow to the engravings on the far wall, he turned and walked down the steps to the seats which filled most of the room, passing between the two main sections and scooping Aurora off the floor as he came. “Draco,” he said with a nod, setting his granddaughter on his shoulders.

“Sir.” Draco traced a pattern in the grain of the marble with one finger, sparing only a scrap of attention for Aurora’s gleeful gurgles or Professor Riddle’s murmured greetings. The voices which returned the greetings drew more of Draco’s attention away from his thoughts, which was a

good thing as a small, hurtling body struck his legs at high speed almost immediately. He would have fallen into the water if he hadn't seen the living missile coming, and staggered back a pace as it was.

"Take it easy, there, Dragon," he protested, prying the boy off him and returning the boisterous hug. "This isn't the place for playing rough."

"Yes, and you know that, or you should," said Danger, following her son inside with Jenny in her arms. Moony was behind her, Nicki clinging to his hand with wide eyes as though she had never been in this place before, though Draco knew she was here often. "Take your sister to look at the paintings and the statues, and do it quietly."

"Can we light a candle?" Dragon asked, taking Nicki's hand in his.

"If you're good," said Moony. "Go on, now."

The two trotted away, Draco watching them up the side aisle before he returned his attention to the adults. "I have to decide today, don't I?" he asked.

"No," said Danger firmly. "Tonight is only the traditional time. If you're not sure, wait until you are."

"Our offer stands no matter what," Moony said. "We'd be proud to sponsor you, whenever you decide."

For a moment, Draco was tempted to take the way out they were offering, to say he wasn't ready, to back away from this level of commitment and finish as he had begun, a free agent, not beholden to anyone...

*Now wait just a minute here. Who do I think I'm fooling? I was never a free agent! I had a piece of Dark magic on my bloody soul when I showed up here, and I was going to be either mad or as Dark as it was within a year! I know what Dark magic does, I've experienced it firsthand, and I'm through with it. Done. Finished.*

*What better way to make that clear than to join the other side all formal-like?*

"I'm in," he said, looking up. "I want this."

"How wonderful." Danger kissed him on the cheek. "And it means we finally get a real claim to you, too. You're expected for dinner at least twice a week, now, no excuses."

"Have you chosen a name?" Moony asked.

Draco nodded. "It's hard to explain," he said. "But if you have some time..."

"Nowhere to be but here." Danger's hand took in the entirety of the snug, wood-paneled room with its sweet-smelling air. "Explain away."

“I want it to be Luke. Not because of Luke Skywalker, though that’s fun all by itself.” Draco grinned, inviting the Beauvois to share the joke, and felt his heart warm when they both chuckled. “But because it’s so close to... my father.” He hadn’t called Lucius that to mean it in months, and it came surprisingly easily to his tongue. “Because he wasn’t, he isn’t, all bad. There were good things about him. There still are, even now, when he’s let his fear and his self-centeredness take him over.”

“And you want to remember those good things,” said Moony, nodding. “But let the bad ones go.”

“If I can.” The fingers of his left hand flexed open and closed at his mental command, a breath slower than his original hand would have but still obedient to his mind’s bidding. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough.”

“If you’re not, you will be.” Danger bounced Jenny in her arms as the little girl showed signs of waking. “That’s what this evening is for. Shall we go start getting you ready for your vigil, then, young squire?”

“Didn’t the little ones want to light a candle?” Draco looked around to see if he could spot Dragon and Nicki, and found them together near the front, looking up at a statue of a smiling woman.

“They did, and we can do that now,” said Moony, getting up. “And then go and help you prepare for your big night.” He grinned. “Pun fully intended.”

Draco and Danger groaned in two-part harmony.

## Be Careful 87: What You Agree To

“You got me drunk.”

Tonks looked up at her husband. “Happy Easter to you too.”

“No day is happy that starts with a hangover.” Remus had his eyes nearly shut, and he was leaning his head against the doorframe. “Why did I listen to you about that party?”

“Because everybody needed it and you know it.” Tonks levitated a cup half-filled with a dark liquid towards Remus. “Drink that. Mum made it up for you last night.”

Remus took a cautious sniff of the contents of the cup and wrinkled his nose in distaste, but downed it in one gulp. “Not as bad as Wolfsbane,” he said, setting the empty cup aside. “And—ah, yes.” The furrows smoothed out of his forehead, and he came into the room to sit down beside Tonks. “I assume there’s enough for Harry and Ron as well, whenever they get up. None of the girls had enough to affect them too badly.”

“Two more doses waiting in the kitchen.” Tonks leaned over for her good-morning kiss. “How much do you remember?”

“Enough to be sure none of them will ever take me seriously again.” Remus shook his head, though he was smiling. “I didn’t know I knew that many horrible jokes. ‘What’s the difference between a butterbeer cap and my lovely wife’ indeed.”

Tonks wiggled her eyebrows at him. “Do you think I want you to do that?”

“Judging by a few of the things you were saying while Teddy was being born...” Remus ducked as Tonks made a fist. “I’ll take that as a no, then, shall I?”

“You shall. I thought the songs were the best bit, myself. Especially the one about that special ball.” Tonks treated him to a wicked grin. “If we ever decide to have a big ceremony, a vow renewal or whatever, that’s the kind of reception I want.”

Remus stared at her aghast for one second, then groaned as she laughed. “Molly is going to kill me, you realize,” he said. “Ron’s one thing, he was already corrupted, but her only daughter...”

Tonks flexed her fingers, running through her hand warm-ups. “I would say everyone who was

here has a vested interest in Molly never finding out about it.”

“Which means she’ll know within a month,” Remus returned. “Or doesn’t Andromeda have those senses as well tuned anymore?”

“Good point. Still, if we can get to a point where Molly Weasley is the worst thing we’re worried about, we’ll be doing well.” Sharpening her ears for a moment, Tonks heard only the regular breathing of sleep from the other occupants of the house, and decided it might be a good time to broach a subject she’d been avoiding until after she was no longer pregnant. “Speaking of things to worry about, didn’t Harry want your help getting into Hogwarts?”

“If I’m any indication, he’s unlikely to be in shape to work on that today, and I think he needs another day or two of rest in any case before he’ll be back to full strength. There’s no rush, since he’s said he won’t leave without Hermione.” Remus looked sidelong at her. “Is there a reason you ask?”

“Well... yes.” Tonks drew her wand and summoned the papers she’d received at Christmas from the desk in her bedroom. “Remus, love, I need you to look at these and think about them, really think, not just react. Mum’s checked it already and she says the theory’s sound, and I ran all the spells past Bill to have him look for trapdoors or hidden tricks but there weren’t any...”

“Anything with that dramatic a lead-in makes me suspicious,” said Remus, accepting the papers. “What is this? Or perhaps I should ask, what is this supposed to be?”

“Just read it? Please?”

Remus unfolded the papers and began to scan them. Tonks turned away, giving him what privacy she could, and began to grow and ungrow her fingernails out of sheer nerves.

*Don’t reject this because I have to be involved, she willed him. Don’t pretend you don’t want it or it would be better for us not to do it. Don’t say you can’t take advantage of me that way. Just don’t.*

*Because if you do, I will scream.*

---

“What is that?” said Hermione, peering out the door of the girls’ bedroom towards the stairs. “It sounds like someone screaming. I hope nothing’s wrong...”

“Frustration.” Ginny pushed the door shut with a foot. “None of our concern.”

Hermione and Luna both looked at her. She returned the look blandly. “In a house with Fred and George, you learn the difference,” she said. “It sounded like Tonks. I wonder what it’s about?”

“She’s probably showed Professor Lupin those spells I sent her.” Luna folded a clean diaper neatly into thirds and laid it on the pile. “And he’s worried about them, or afraid of them, which I wish

he wouldn't be. They could help him so much.”

Behind Luna's back, Hermione and Ginny held a brief, intense staring contest. Hermione lost. “What spells?” she asked. “And why would Remus be afraid of them?”

“Because some part of him believes he deserves to be a werewolf.” Luna neatened her stack of diapers, then started a new one beside it on the bed. “So anything that could help him also frightens him, because he's afraid that life will punish him for trying to get anything better than he has.”

“And these spells would help him somehow?” Ginny asked.

“Oh, yes.” Turning to face her friends, Luna sat down on the bed beside the white cloth heap. “They have a wonderful story to them—it starts out scary, but most good stories do...”

Hermione listened in fascination. She knew how badly werewolves were thought of in the wizarding world, but she hadn't realized that they had once been classed under wizard law as animals, and dangerous animals at that. It had been legal, then, to chase them away from your home with anything up to and including deadly force. It had been legal to put out poison for them or trap them and leave them to die.

And it had been legal to own them.

Legal, but very dangerous, as Luna explained earnestly. “Because everyone knew that they still had human minds when they weren't transformed, even though they didn't want to say so out loud,” she said, twirling a diaper by one corner for emphasis. “So people came up with spells and artifacts to keep them from fighting back or running away. And one of those spells worked especially well.”

The problem with a continually working spell, Hermione recalled from her N.E.W.T. preparation, was its power source. A simple charm or transfiguration happened once and was finished, so it never needed more power than the caster gave it at the beginning. But a spell like Luna was describing, which would keep a werewolf—a human being in all but name, and furious at being enslaved—under control and “safe” to be around, would need recharging constantly, and if the caster forgot to do it even once...

“They made the power source the werewolves' own feelings.” Luna pleated the diaper between her fingers. “Their anger, their bitterness, their hatred for the people who were doing this to them. So the only way the spell could ever wear off, they thought, was if the werewolves learned to love their masters.”

“And then, what need for the spell?” Ginny shivered. “That's horrible.”

“It is.” Ripples of white wove around Luna's fingers. “The spell wasn't just ‘don't hurt me,’ either. It was all about control. The master could speak within the werewolf's mind, give commands that had to be obeyed, or even use the werewolf's body like his own. It took a lot of

concentration, because the werewolves knew it was happening and would fight back, but the spell made sure they always lost in the end.”

“What about full moons?” Hermione asked. “What happened then?”

“Something they weren’t expecting.” Luna pulled the diaper free with a flourish. “The masters were expecting to be able to control the wolf’s mind more easily than they could control the human’s. But when they controlled the wolf’s mind... that meant the human’s mind could come back. It wasn’t pushed out like it would be in an uncontrolled transformation. And the master had to fight both the wolf and the human, and some masters couldn’t do that. So they died.”

“What about the rest?” Ginny had her arms around her knees and was rocking back and forth in concentration. “There has to be some reason the spell went out of use. Other than it being disgustingly wrong.”

Luna smiled. “The masters forgot that the opposite of hate isn’t love,” she said. “The opposite of hate is not caring. The werewolves didn’t have to love their masters to make the spell stop working—they just had to learn to be calm and indifferent for long enough that the spell would lose power. Then they could care again. And they did.” Her eyes were bleak for a moment, as though she knew too much about how the werewolves had cared. “They cared a lot.”

“So would I,” said Hermione, thinking of the terror and anger she hadn’t been able to suppress at Malfoy Manor, despite the nearly silent voice whispering comfort to her.

*Even knowing it wouldn’t happen, I still hated every second of what Draco was telling me. How would I feel if he’d meant it, and went through with it?*

“Call me little miss silly if you want to,” said Ginny, “but I don’t see what any of this has to do with Tonks and Professor Lupin. They’re not about to use that kind of a spell, are they?”

“That *kind* of a spell, yes.” Luna held up her hand as Ginny reddened. “It’s been changed. It isn’t Dark anymore.”

Hermione stared at her friend. “Not Dark? How?”

“Simple.” Luna draped the diaper over her hand, then pulled it away like a Muggle magician doing a conjuring trick. “Change the power source.”

“The power source?” Ginny sucked air through her teeth, thinking. “Hate is a bad idea, I can see that, but what would you use—oh!” It was an explosion of sound. “Never mind me, I’m so stupid, of course!”

“The thing that isn’t really the opposite of hate,” said Hermione with a smile as it came to her. “You’d power it with love. But it’s still a spell of control, and I can’t see Remus liking that, even if it would mean he could have his human mind on full moons. Wolfsbane does that, without someone else having to be in charge of you.”

“There’s the second way it’s different.” Luna’s hand went around one corner of the diaper. “The original spell was all one way. A master and a slave.” She snapped the diaper, making a sound like a whip. “This spell is really two spells—the same spell twice.” Her other hand came up and grasped the diaper’s other corner, and she pulled it taut. “Two people, casting it on each other.”

“Which would make them both the masters of each other,” Ginny said, doodling in the air with a finger. “I could see how that could turn bad if they had a fight, but I suppose if you did the spell right the powers would just cancel out in normal times...”

Luna nodded. “The ‘control’ bits have things added that mean ‘not without permission except in emergencies,’” she said. “And just a fight isn’t an emergency. A transformation is, but the same thing happens there that did with the original spell.”

“The person who isn’t a werewolf can control the wolf’s mind.” Hermione had to resist the urge to touch her face, to see if she could tell how big her smile had grown. “And then the werewolf’s human mind can come back. Which means he isn’t dangerous, just like he’d taken Wolfsbane.” She stopped, frowning. “Where has Remus been getting his, anyway? I know Snape made it when he was a teacher...”

“Andromeda makes it now,” said Luna, standing up and turning back to her work. “She said if she has to have a werewolf in her house, she wants to know what he’s getting into.”

“Her daughter?” Ginny suggested with a sly grin.

Hermione groaned. “He’s infecting you,” she said as Luna giggled. “Dirty, dirty minds.”

“You’ve met my brothers. Why would you think I’d have anything else?”

“Good point.”

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“Let’s go over this one more time.” Tonks ticked off points on her fingers. “The spells would link us together, but both of us would be able to keep the other one out of private thoughts and memories. The only things we’d share would be the ones we decided to share, just like talking aloud.”

“Except for this bit about emotional outbursts,” Remus objected. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s no different than blurting something out by accident.”

Remus shot her a quick look. “Like ‘I’ve told you a million times I don’t care,’ perhaps?”

“Yes. Exactly like that.” Tonks glared at him. “Are you going to claim you’re sorry I said it?”

“Would I dare?” Remus ran a finger down the neatly printed paragraphs. “Spells are continually powered by the affection and love of the two people involved...” he murmured.

“What about that one? Going to say you don’t think you’ll love me next month, or next year?”

“My, you are fond of putting words in my mouth today,” Remus said mildly, still reading. “Controlling aspect of spells goes into effect when the human mind of the lycanthrope is overtaken at full moon... with the wolf mind controlled, the human mind can reemerge...”

He set the papers aside and looked Tonks straight in the eye. “Are you truly sure you want to do this?” he asked, his voice hesitant but his gaze unwavering. “A marriage is one thing, even a child, but this is a bond that doesn’t look as though it can ever be reversed...”

“It’s powered by love,” Tonks pointed out. “If I ever stop loving you, it stops working.” She leaned forward and hooked an arm behind his neck, pulling him close enough that she could demonstrate the extent of her current feelings. “Which means,” she whispered when she was done, “that it ought to last damn near forever at this rate.”

Remus sighed. “I don’t deserve you—” he began.

Tonks slapped him on the back of the head.

“Ouch.” Remus returned her earlier favor, giving the detailed attention to kissing that he did to everything else in life and making her entire body tingle in anticipation of her full recovery from Teddy’s birth.

“But since you seem determined to save me in spite of myself,” he murmured against her lips a few moments later, “what can I say except thank you, and yes?”

Tonks later estimated that neither of them breathed for over a minute.

## Be Careful

### 88: What You Interpret

Ray shook Draco awake on Monday morning. “Meeting up in the Great Hall,” he said. “We’ve got trouble.”

“We who?” Draco kicked his covers off and swung his legs out of bed. “We the family, we at Hogwarts...”

“We as human beings,” said Vince, coming in from the bathroom. “There was a major attack on Manchester last night. At least twenty people Kissed, and that’s only the ones they know for sure.”

“They said it looked like someone got the wards down the way that Black bitch did here back in the fall,” Greg added from behind his friend. “Showed the dementors a weak spot and had them attack it constantly until it failed.”

“And Father’s home right now checking our wards for that same pattern.” Ray was clenching and unclenching his fists as though he hoped to punch the person responsible for the sabotage. “I *knew* they shouldn’t have failed at Luna’s ball, I just *knew* it...”

Draco fastened his day robes, finger-combed his hair into a semblance of order, and cast a quick Minty-Fresh Charm on his mouth. “Lead on, I follow,” he said, putting his wand away.

“Quit stealing my lines,” Ray grumbled, heading out of the dorm.

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The House tables were missing from the Hall, which had instead been filled with wooden benches in the manner of an old-fashioned auditorium. Said benches were occupied by the teachers and most of the students fifth year and above, though younger ones were dotted here and there. Abby looked around from her seat beside Hermione as the Slytherins entered, and shot to the back for a hug from Ray before attaching herself to Draco. “It’s bad,” she said into his robes. “And I know I should stop trying to See it, but I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” Draco peeled her off him and sat her down at the end of one bench before sliding in beside her. “Try Seeing other things instead. Like the party I went to the other night, with my Luna and that world’s Hermione and Harry and Moony and Weasleys.”

Abby nodded doubtfully, leaning into Draco’s side. “I’ll try,” she said.

Draco looked up at the dais. Moony and Professor Riddle were setting up a large display screen where the high table usually sat, while Professor Dumbledore murmured urgently with Professor McGonagall and several worn-looking Aurors to one side. James Potter and Sirius Black, in particular, both looked exhausted, and Sirius was shaking his head in quick spurts as he talked, like his dog form trying to rid itself of something foul.

Beside him, Abby muffled a squeal with her hand, then stared up at Draco with wide and worshipful eyes. "I love you," she said through her fingers. "I love you *very much*."

Storing this for later investigation, Draco sat up straighter as Professor Dumbledore stepped onto the dais.

"As you may know, the city of Manchester was last night attacked in force by dementors, causing the wards to fail," the Headmaster announced. "The current count of those definitely Kissed stands at thirty-four, and over one hundred people are missing. Most of those..." He had to stop for a moment as a wave of whispering broke out. "Most of those," he resumed when the Hall was quiet again, "are simply unaccounted for. Anyone who was separated from his family, for instance, or lost her mobile or her Zippo in the confusion, would be listed as missing. It is expected that the majority of them will be found unharmed."

*Thirty-four is bad enough.* Draco did some mental arithmetic and swallowed hard at the results. *That's as many as all the Beauvois, all the Potters and the Weasleys, and most of the Blacks too, and it can only go up from there...*

"However." Dumbledore's voice was flat in a way Draco had never heard before, not even on the Astronomy Tower. "Our problems are greater than this." He moved back, ceding the floor to Professor Riddle.

"Some of you have heard rumors that Manchester's city wards were breached by treachery," the Defense professor said, pacing back and forth on the dais. "That a wizard or a witch pointed out a weakness in them, which the dementors were able to exploit to make the wards fall. Ladies and gentlemen, the wards were indeed destroyed by the exploitation of a weak point, but there was no human being involved." He ran a hand through his dark hair, his face older than Draco had ever seen it look. "The evidence..."

He broke off, shaking his head. "I beg your pardon. This is difficult for me." A deep breath, and he continued. "The evidence points to certain dementors having Kissed human beings, taken their souls, and rather than converting those souls into new dementors, retaining the souls within themselves... and thereby gaining human-level intelligence."

Across the room, Harry uttered one word. It was short, Anglo-Saxon, and summed up Draco's feelings perfectly. Judging by the massive wave of nervous laughter, most of the audience felt the same way.

"Yes, Potter, I think we all agree with you on that one." Professor Riddle hooked his arms behind his head and stretched. "Though some of us might have put it differently."

“Like ‘bloody hell that’s bad’?” Ron suggested from a few seats down.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure we all have our own way to say it,” Professor McGonagall said testily as the Hall erupted with suggestions for phrasing. “But if we could all be QUIET for a moment...”

Silence reigned.

“Thank you.” McGonagall tapped her wand against the edge of the display screen, causing it to light up. A photograph of a piece of paper was revealed, with words written rather blotchily on it. “This was located in one of the homes invaded by dementors. The homeowners, a mixed family named Franklin, assure us that it was not present when they evacuated. It is, however, written on their paper with their pens and their ink. The only conclusion we can draw is that a dementor wrote it, and left it behind to be found when they were expelled from the city.”

Draco leaned forward, squinting to try to decipher the words. *Scribble of stars something strong, squiggle squiggle stronger, give blotch to us or we something else, the chicken-scratch is wrong, we are your...*

“We have not yet determined what message the dementors wish to send us,” said Professor Riddle, looking out over the audience. “If anyone thinks they can read it, please see us privately.”

For one instant, his eyes held Draco’s, and Draco blinked as a pair of images entered his mind—himself and Abby leaving the Great Hall, and the door to Moony and Danger’s quarters on the third floor. He gave a slight nod, and Professor Riddle nodded back.

“Overall,” said Professor Dumbledore, stepping forward, “this changes nothing. We knew dementors were a threat. Now we know more about them. With time and determination, we will defeat them. I would ask you to continue your usual Patronus practice, and also to try to produce a Warrior Patronus if you can, for these ‘wise’ dementors have one great weakness. Because they contain two souls on a more-or-less permanent basis, they can be killed at any time.”

“Then why don’t we just go out and kill them all?” Ray asked loudly.

“If we could find them, we would,” said Dumbledore. “But they are indistinguishable to human senses from any other dementor. The only way we could tell them apart would be to observe them and watch for human-like behavior. And I fear anyone close enough to do such observation would soon be not an observer but part of a wise dementor himself. Or herself.”

There were a few shrill giggles, but overall the room was still.

“Thank you for your attention.” Dumbledore vanished the screen and restored the high table. “If you would rise and make your way out into the entrance hall, breakfast will be served shortly.”

“They expect us to eat after that?” said Marcus in amazement over the sound of people standing up.

“My God, something finally put the walking stomach off his food.” Lyssa was gazing at the front

of the room. "I'm going to talk to Dad. He doesn't look so good."

"I am not a walking stomach," Marcus grumbled as the Slytherins started for the door. "It's rude to the house-elves not to eat what they give you."

"And of course you're always the soul of courtesy," said Ray, dodging a swipe by the younger boy.

"You hungry, Joy?" Draco asked Abby under the cover of the ensuing bickering.

A brown head shook. "Did Professor Riddle have a message for you?"

"Yes, he wants us up in your parents' rooms."

Abby bounced once on the balls of her feet, her smile a fraction of its usual size but still genuine. "Yours now too."

"Not the same kind as they are to you."

"But still yours."

The discussion got them across the entrance hall, up the marble staircase and two smaller ones, and all the way to the door Draco had seen pictured in his mind. Danger opened it almost before they could knock, pulling them both inside and into one of her patented mother hugs. This was difficult, considering the height difference among the three of them, but she managed somehow.

"I suppose we should have known," she said when she let them go. "Things were going so well."

Abby hurried over to her father, who was sitting at a small table with his head in his hands. Draco watched her until he felt a tap on his elbow, and turned to find his mum behind him, a sheet of parchment just visible at the join between right hand and hip. "Do I not rate a hug?" she asked, lifting her nose high in the air.

Draco let his arms do the answering for him. Her familiar perfume wafted around him as he rested his head against hers. "My dearest," she whispered to him. "My little love." A wry chuckle. "Though I must say 'little' is debatable, as you have been taller than I since we met."

"I'll always be your baby," Draco promised, and felt her laugh again. "Is something wrong, Mum? That message the dementors left, was it worked out after all?"

"I can read it," Moony said hoarsely from where he was sitting with Abby curled up in his lap. "So could James and Sirius, and possibly Minerva if she hasn't lost the knack, though it's been long enough that I'd imagine she has."

"Why you three?" Draco asked, crossing to sit down at the table with his mum and Danger. "Did you take some kind of owl-order course in dementor handwriting?"

Moony snorted. "I only wish the answer were that simple," he said, holding out his hand to Mum, who gave him one of the parchments she'd been holding. "I've made a clean copy."

Draco peered at the words, done in Moony's careful writing, and felt his stomach turn over.

*Serpent of stars grows strong.  
We grow stronger.  
Give him to us or we take him.  
The prophecy is wrong.  
We are your destiny.*

"Prophecy," he said aloud, trying to distract himself from the first line and the sinking feeling that he knew exactly what it meant. "Isabelle said something about a prophecy, that night she helped the dementors break in here..."

*And she also said Mum thought it was about me.*

*Starwing mentioned a prophecy too, that first night I was here in spirit form—a prophecy about the end of the dementors, and how Abby being born meant it was going to happen...*

"Here it is," said Mum, unfolding the other parchment. "Read it carefully. It may not mean what it seems to mean at first."

Draco accepted the parchment and began to read, quickly once to get the overall shape of the words, then slowly, picking out phrases.

*"When darkness shall be master of the night," yeah, that sounds like now. "Serpent" again here, and "comes forth from faithless light and reflected shadow"—well, if this serpent and the "serpent of stars" from the dementor note mean the same thing, a person's name, then maybe these mean names too...*

The sinking feeling was back in full force; Draco was surprised he was still on the same floor as everyone else. Shoving the fear away, he concentrated on the handwritten lines in front of him. Unfortunately, nothing else seemed to make any sense, except—

*Except that this serpent is supposed to be the one who strikes darkness a blow.*

*Judging by that note, darkness isn't terribly willing to get struck.*

"So how do you know that handwriting?" he asked, looking up at Moony, hoping without much real hope that the delaying tactic would bring about the moment when everyone shouted "Got you!" or "Just kidding!"

"It is the handwriting of a dear friend of mine." Moony stared at the tabletop, his arms around Abby, who was silent and wide-eyed though she must have heard this story many times. "During the Troubles, he and Sirius were trapped together with twelve Muggles, and the dementors closing in on them. He ran out into the open and got the dementors' attention, luring them away, so that

Sirius could bring the Muggles to a skyship and safety.”

“And got Kissed for his pains,” Draco said, fighting down several far more inappropriate comments. His mind had found the parallels immediately, and was contrasting the reckless young hero of this story with the cowering, whimpering man he had known in his original world.

*I guess he had it in him after all, or he could have... who'd have thought?*

“Yes.” Moony’s hands flexed as though he wished for his Animagus form’s claws. “And now I find that for his bravery...” The word seemed to taste bad, as he spat it out. “...he has been condemned to this wretched half-life for all these years, while we have lived in happiness and peace. And I *know* that my brooding about it does no good.” This, viciously, to Danger. “It makes me miserable without helping him in the least. But I hate most of all being unable to stop the pain of those I love. And I did love my friend, just as I love those who are left.”

“Then we will use that love, and we will find him,” Mum said quietly. “You will conjure the Warrior Patronus that frees him from his captivity, and have a moment to say your goodbyes before he departs this world.” Her voice acquired the snappish edge it got when Draco slacked on his schoolwork or snarked too hard at his friends. “Is that agreeable to you, Remus John, or must I throw in a bar of chocolate as well?”

Abby covered her mouth to keep from giggling out loud. Danger didn’t bother.

## **Be Careful**

### **89: Where You Hide**

Lord Albus Dumbledore of Hogwarts looked up from the message on his desk as his door opened. “Ah, Tom, Minerva, please, come in. Cecilia, Remus...”

“Danger stayed with the children,” Remus filled in, closing the door behind himself. “Anything she needs to know, she will.”

“I have no doubt.” Dumbledore smiled at Cecy as she took one of the chairs. “How is Draco?” he asked her. “How has he taken the news?”

“With worry, and with some fear, but it is not paralyzing him.” Cecy rubbed the fingers of her left hand absently. “He was even able to joke about it, saying how grateful he is that this prophecy, unlike the one concerning the other Harry Potter, does not call for his death. As for the note from the dementors, he is highly skeptical that anything would be achieved by, as he put it, ‘noble stupidity’ on his part. I must say I agree.”

“As do I. But it is on that subject that I have asked you all here.” Dumbledore tapped the parchment in front of him. “This arrived a few minutes ago by Floo-messenger, with a request for an immediate reply. It is a summons for one Draco Malfoy, requiring him to present himself at the Ministry of Magic for questioning without delay.”

Cecy’s horrified “No!” and Remus’ soft curse overlapped one another. Minerva bared her teeth and hissed deep in her throat, and Tom sighed wearily.

“Trust the Ministry,” he said. “If there is a way to make a bad situation worse, they will find it.”

“You cannot mean to send him!” Cecy protested over this. “You know what could happen—”

“Please, Cecilia.” Dumbledore held up a hand, and Cecy sat back in her chair, her eyes hooded and wary. “My first reaction was much the same as yours. But a decision this momentous needs facts, not emotions, behind it. We all agree we should not accede to this request, but why? And what will the effects of refusing be on the castle, and the people living here? Tom?”

“The ‘why’ is simple,” Tom said, turning his chair to better face the rest of the group. “There are those at the Ministry, naming no names, who believe in peace at any price. They would consider the life of one young man, whether or not he has agreed to give it up, a small price to pay if it

means the dementors will be mollified. It would never occur to them that the dementors might take Draco and continue to attack us anyway.”

“Even if he is only questioned,” Minerva took over, “what can he tell them that would be helpful? I doubt he has any grand plan for defeating the dementors, not when he only discovered he is meant to do so today!”

“And they would likely consider him a fugitive when he disappeared the first night he slept there,” Remus put in. “Never mind that he can’t control his transits, that they happen whenever he enters dream state for the first time in a night. They would call it evading custody and arrest him for it, and the problem would be compounded.”

“Not to mention, how would he explain where he awakened in his original world?” Cecy shut her eyes, likely against tears. “He would be arrested there as well, and that Ministry is controlled not just by fools but by evildoers. They would question him and discover his activities over the past year, and then he could only hope that they killed him quickly. He *must* stay here.”

“And so he shall.” Dumbledore gave the words the force of law. “I will not let him be taken.”

Cecy sighed in relief, Minerva nodded briskly, and Remus smiled. Only Tom still looked concerned. “I hope you’re not thinking of invoking local authority,” he said. “It’s perfectly legal, but it might be unwise just now.”

“It will be my course of last resort only,” Dumbledore promised. “But if the Ministry proves obstinate, I may have no choice. Unless...” He stopped as a new thought came to him. “Perhaps it will not be necessary. Tell me, Cecy, what would Draco think of spending a few days in hiding?”

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“Let me see here.” Draco held out his hands like scale pans, weighing his options. “A few days in hiding... getting caught by the Ministry...” His right hand went down as the left came up. “Hiding it is.”

“Very well, then.” Mum leaned up and kissed his cheek. “For the sake of truthfulness, I should not know where you are. I have no doubt your friends will be able to steer you in the right direction, though. Be well, and I will see you when this is over.”

“You too.” Draco watched his mum around the corner, then turned to follow Hermione, who had been waiting near the end of the hall. “So what’s this you were saying about my dear old Auntie Isabelle?” he asked as they started up the stairs. “Mum popped up just when you were getting to the good part.”

“It’s been worked out how she faked her death—well, worked out in a mechanical sense, no one’s quite sure on the details yet, we know someone must have helped her but not who or how they got in and out without being seen, you can’t Apparate on the secure wards at St. Mungo’s and the Healers swear no one passed them, but in any case, do you want to hear?”

“Yes, please.” Draco patted his friend’s shoulder. “And try to breathe a little more often. Purple is not your color.”

Hermione stuck out her tongue at him before she went on. “It starts with this idea of wise dementors. They shouldn’t be able to hold onto a soul like that, any more than I should be able to keep on being pregnant after it’s the baby’s time to be born.” Her hand rested protectively on her belly, still flat for the time being. “So that means someone must have done it to them, and the Blood Purists seem the best candidates.”

“You think Bella did it herself?”

“I think she was part of it, but she can’t have done it all, because otherwise she would have made an army of wise dementors and found the weak spots in everyone’s wards by now.” Hermione stepped neatly over the vanishing stair, which Draco leapt, making her smile. “I’d guess it was someone else, maybe her husband or his brother, who did most of it, and she’s had to try to reproduce it all this time before she finally got it last summer.”

“In time to make enough wise dementors to get through your wards at Luna’s ball.” Draco shivered, remembering how near a thing that had been. “All right, but that still doesn’t explain how she faked being dead well enough to fool Healers.”

“Once they had one wise dementor, it could communicate with them,” Hermione explained, turning down a particular hallway. “Tell them things about itself. Like how the Kiss works, and what kind of magic might be able to reproduce it.” She rapped at a door, which was opened by Professor Riddle. “May we see it, please, Professor?” she asked.

“‘It’? What ‘it’ might this be?” Professor Riddle smiled at Hermione’s growl. “Yes, I’m only teasing, come in.” He moved aside to allow them entrance. “Meet the only piece of magical technology I’ve ever been unsure if I wanted destroyed or not.”

“That can reproduce a Dementor’s Kiss?” Draco asked, staring at the small smoked-glass bottle in Professor McGonagall’s hands. It looked like something he’d give his mum for Christmas, not a weapon of magical destruction. “How?”

“It isn’t charged at the moment,” Professor McGonagall said, carefully setting the bottle on the table. “But when it operates at full power, simply opening the top will attract all souls in the area towards it immediately. A normal, healthy person should have no difficulty, her attachment to her body should override it—but if someone should happen to be ill, weak, even dying...”

“It pulls their soul into it?” Draco took a closer look at the little bottle. “That can’t last very long.”

“It doesn’t.” Professor Riddle removed the stopper from the bottle and peered at it. “The captivity lasts twenty-four hours at most, less if the magic runs out. But for Isabelle LeStrange, twenty-four hours was enough.”

“She had an accomplice,” Hermione explained. “We don’t know who, but she has to have done,

because what happened was they cast a spell on her that made her die a little slower than a Killing Curse. Just before she died, they used the soul flask to catch her soul, then put a spell on her body that would keep it from..." She shifted uncomfortably. "You know. In any case, once the Healers confirmed she was dead and her body was moved to the morgue, her accomplice came back, took that spell off, started up her heart and her breathing again, and let her soul out of the flask."

"And it went home." Draco frowned, thinking. "But then, couldn't Snape just have gone back into his body after I'd taken that bloody dementor down a peg?"

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "Dragging a soul from a living body does irreparable damage to that soul," she said, pulling a sheet of parchment thick with notes towards her and beginning to study it. "This device is designed to get around that limitation by catching the soul at the moment of death, when it would naturally leave the body in any case. Also, Isabelle was prepared for what would happen to her, and expected to be able to return. Severus had no such expectation."

"His body's still alive, isn't it?" Hermione asked. "Down in the hospital wing?"

"It is," Professor Riddle confirmed. "Magic does make invalid care that much easier, I must say."

Draco fished a Galleon from his pocket and began to toss and catch it in his left hand, the familiar motions quieting his thoughts. Several fragmentary ideas were jostling for position in his mind. "May I borrow that?" he asked, pointing to the flask. "I'll be careful with it. It's just that I've got the first bits of something important, and this is related somehow..."

"I don't see why not." Professor Riddle replaced the stopper in the flask and handed the whole assemblage to Draco. "Now, I think you'd best be getting along. I have no more wish than Cecilia to have to lie to the Ministry."

"Any more than necessary," added Professor McGonagall without looking up from her notes.

Draco and Hermione managed to make it through the door before they burst out laughing. The remaining staircases and hallways were traversed in alternate states of carefully avoiding one another's eyes and giggling like lunatics.

At last they reached the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, and Hermione hugged Draco tightly. "This is where I get off," she said. "Be sure to say friends can find you, or none of us will be able to get in to bring your meals."

"And how terrible that would be." Draco was about to release her when he remembered a debt still owing to someone who looked very much like this. "Can you ask Meghan to stop in if she can? I need to ask her something."

"Of course, I'm sure she will." Hermione squeezed him once more and let him go. "Break a leg."

"Thanks." Draco leaned against the wall to watch his friend out of sight, wondering idly if he'd

ever get to hug his original world's Hermione that way.

*Not if I don't keep my promise to her, I won't.*

*But first things first. Staying out of the Ministry's way.*

He began to pace back and forth along the corridor, concentrating hard on a place to hide, a place to be safe, a place where only friends could find him, no one who owed their allegiance to the Ministry and wanted to question him about his plans to miraculously save the world...

*Yeah, if I could do that, don't you think I would have by now? Draco pulled open the door that had appeared in the wall and stepped inside, shutting it behind him. I'm flying blind here, just like everyone else, the only difference is there's a bunch of words written down that seem to say I might do something special, I don't necessarily know what it is...*

Pushing that thought out of his head for the moment, he looked up at his new hideaway.

"Wow," he said, impressed in spite of himself. The Room of Requirement had formed itself into something like a ship's stateroom, done in dark wood paneling, with a balcony from which a hammock hung, a large bookshelf and wardrobe, a wireless in one corner besides a desk and chair, and a door slightly ajar to show bathroom fixtures behind it. "Nicely done."

As if in answer, a ripple appeared on the paneling near the hammock, and a green banner unrolled, emblazoned with the silver serpent of Slytherin.

"I suppose that's 'Welcome aboard.'" Draco leaned his head against the door, only to jump nearly out of his skin as a brisk knock sounded on the other side. "Come in!" he called when he thought he had his voice back under control.

A head decorated with bright-beaded braids poked around the door. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah, Pearl, come on inside. Extra chair, please," Draco said to the room, which developed one beside the desk. "I had a question about my world's Hermione..."

Meghan listened to his half-formed ideas, but her face was grave, and she shook her head when he was done. "The spells for patterning ferecarne are just too complicated," she said. "It's third-year Healer apprentice work, way beyond anything you could learn in the next couple of weeks."

"That's what I was afraid of." Draco nodded, fighting to conceal his crushing disappointment. He'd given his word, and now it looked as though he was going to be forsworn.

*Living up to my name. Or down.*

"Don't look like that," Meghan scolded. "There could still be a way."

Draco laughed ruefully. "Not too good at hiding what I feel, am I?"

“I think you’re just storing it up for when you really, truly need it.” Meghan planted one heel on her chair and hugged her knee thoughtfully. “And I read up on this after you got hurt at Christmas. Putting a pattern into brand-new ferecarne is too hard, but there is something else you might be able to learn to do...”

## Be Careful 90: Whom You Challenge

Draco awakened on Friday morning with a rasping sound in his ears and a feeling of warmth against his right side. Opening his eyes, he lifted the blanket draped over his hammock to discover the source of both sensations.

“That’s odd,” he said aloud. “I don’t remember ordering a mini-me.”

“Roouoaaaaaar,” mumbled Dragon Charlie without waking up.

Somebody giggled.

Draco fixed Abby with a glare. She returned it with the sweet serenity of the person who can hold her challenger’s breakfast hostage against his good behavior.

“All right, I’m up.” Draco swung his legs out of the hammock and flipped the covers off Dragon, who grumbled in his sleep and reached down for them. “Oh no you don’t,” Draco said, and flipped the hammock over. The Room of Requirement obligingly sprouted a padded floor in the impact area, but Dragon still hit hard enough that his yelp of indignation was mostly driven out of him.

“You deserved it,” Abby informed her little brother, beginning to pour tea. “Mum says the Ministry’ll probably give up today, Draco.”

“Huzzah for that.” Cracking his back, Draco headed for the bathroom. “Thought they’d never leave. That’s one thing no better on the one side than the other.”

“Luna told me once about little blood-sucking things called Polyticks,” Dragon said, sitting up. “She said they get everywhere and make the Ministry stupid no matter what world you’re in.”

“She’s probably right.” Draco shut the door and allowed himself a brief moment of wishing it had been Luna in the hammock with him, Luna with her soft hair and her warm lips and her—

*All right, you pervert, there’s kids out there. Keep it clean. Remember, she’ll be here as soon as Harry and company are ready to move, and that shouldn’t be any later than Walpurgisnacht.*

The thirtieth of April had been the last day on the list of dates Abby had foreseen in her one session with the TVP. Since the other three had proved true—St. Luke’s Day had seen Ron stomping out of the tent in the woods and netted Draco his chance at the cup, Christmas Eve had

reunited the Trio and destroyed Nagini and Draco's Mark, and Good Friday had brought down the house in the most literal way possible—Draco had no question in his mind that this final date would bring the maddest year of his life to a close.

*The only question is, will I finish everything I need to do before then?*

While brushing his teeth, Draco considered his to-do list. It was daunting, not for its length but for the vagueness of the items on it. Retrieving the diadem from the Room of Hiding was still impossible, because the Room of Requirement at his original Hogwarts could (as he had discovered after a rather tense morning earlier in the week) either generate a secret exit elsewhere in the castle so Snape's troll tattletales wouldn't catch him or take on its alternate identity. It couldn't do both.

*And I can't figure out why I wanted to look at that soul flask. Except maybe to verify that it can't be powered by any spell I know, or any that my friends know either. I'm starting to wonder if it's spell-powered at all, or if it has to run on some other kind of magic...*

He dried his face, hung up the towel, and left the bathroom. Abby was rolling her eyes as Dragon poured a lavish amount of cream into his tea. "Leave some for the rest of us, brat," Draco said, snagging the creamer from above. Dragon stuck out a tongue covered in chewed-up eggs.

"Ewww," Abby protested. "That's disgusting."

Dragon promptly treated his sister to a huge, open-mouthed grin.

"Ewww!"

*Ah, family.* Draco sat down and began serving himself. *Can't live with 'em... oh wait. Yes I can.*

"Sit," he said through a bite of porridge, forestalling Abby's attempt to jump up and smack Dragon upside the head and Dragon's preparations to hit her back first. "That's unless you want me to make seatbelts on the chairs. I can, you know."

Both Beauvois subsided, though they continued to cast poisonous glances at one another through the remainder of the meal. Finally, Abby crossed her eyes at Dragon, who sucked in his lips back at her, and everyone laughed, cementing a peace treaty.

"I brought this," said Abby, pulling a small mirror from her pocket as the remains of breakfast disappeared. "Aunt Cecy's got the other one, she said she'd turn it on as soon as things got interesting."

As though it were choreographed, a knock sounded on the door at this point. "Go away, nobody's home!" yelled Dragon, and the door opened to the sound of laughter. Students flooded inside, not only Draco's friends and their siblings but a great many others. He gathered from the noisy babble, as Harry and the Weasleys set the two-way mirror to broadcast its image onto the wall and magnify the sound it gathered from the other side, that the Ministry officials had not been making

themselves popular the last few days.

“They keep looking at us like you’d look at cattle,” said Pansy Parkinson with an expressive shudder. “And asking if we’ve decided who we’re going to marry. Going on and on about how we have a ‘sacred duty’ to spread magic through the world so that fewer people fall prey to the ‘dreadful scourge’ of dementors.” She smirked. “One of them offered to introduce me to her Muggle nephew. I told her I’d love to meet him, and introduce him to my Muggle boyfriend who just happens to be a boxing champion.”

Draco laughed at this, remembering with a strange mixture of nausea and nostalgia the way the Pansy of his original world had fawned on him the year before. *And stayed well away from me this year, just like everyone else. Well, almost everyone...*

Past Pansy’s shoulder, a pair of familiar faces caught his eye. Daphne Greengrass and a girl who could have passed for his new friend Story’s twin stood hand in hand, giggling together.

“I should know this already,” he said tentatively to Pansy, “but...”

She half-turned and followed his line of sight. “Well, I’d hope you know the older one,” she teased. “The younger one is Astoria.”

*The younger one—of course, I’m an idiot, they’re sisters. I knew that. Or I should have.*

Endless childhood lessons on pureblood families and possible matches rose up to reproach him; Draco made a mental face at them. *You don’t matter anymore. I picked my girl already, and I picked her because she’s funny and smart and beautiful and because she believes wonderful things. She could be half-blood or Muggleborn and it wouldn’t matter one bit...*

*Except it will.* The realization made his stomach drop. *Even if we manage to make that last jump, if we get here together, unless I can figure out what I’m supposed to do and get rid of the dementors for good, that marriage law is going to pass. Which would mean Luna and I can’t ever get married.*

*As if I needed more motivation to get it worked out, and soon.*

“Shh!” Ginny waved frantically at the crowd. “It’s starting!”

People quieted down and turned to watch. The image on the wall, though rather distorted, was unmistakably Professors Dumbledore, Riddle, and McGonagall, forming a courteous half-circle around a small, dumpy woman in a cardigan the color of freshly-chewed bubble gum. Draco wondered for a moment where his mum was, then realized she was carrying the mirror and obviously couldn’t appear in it at the same time.

*Stupid me.*

“I don’t know what to tell you, Dolores,” Professor Dumbledore was saying in his gravest tones. “It seems that the young man you’re looking for is simply nowhere to be found.”

Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge gave Dumbledore a sharp look, then switched it to McGonagall when it had no effect. After a few seconds trying to outstare the Transfiguration professor, she opted to bypass Riddle entirely and switched to a point directly above the mirror, meaning the assembled students got a good look at her wide and toadish face. Raspberries, hisses, and other derisive noises abounded, and Umbridge frowned as though she could hear them—

*Wait, I think she can!*

Draco peered towards the front of the room and caught Ron's eye. "She can hear us," he mouthed, pointing at the mirror. "Kill the sound."

Ron looked confused for an instant, then nodded and jabbed his wand at the mirror. Umbridge's frown intensified, though, and Draco thought Ron had got it wrong until he realized the sound had died down. Something else was causing Dolores Umbridge to look as disgruntled as she could possibly look, which was quite disgruntled indeed.

*Something like, perhaps, a delicate little Healer being not so delicate as she looks?*

"I find it so interesting, Madam Black," Umbridge said after a few more moments of staring. Draco heard Meghan hiss between her teeth, and clenched his own at the implied insult delivered by Umbridge's ignoring his mum's real title. "This contract between you and Master—Malfoy, is it?"

She withdrew a scroll from her cardigan pocket, and Draco growled under his breath as he recognized it. *How dare she touch that?*

"Obviously he exists, since he signed the contract. But I have searched the records most carefully, both magical and Muggle, and I can find no previous appearance of that name. It is almost as if, in fact, he did not exist until you adopted him!" Umbridge gave one of her vacuous little giggles.

"A most ingenious paradox, is it not?" Mum replied calmly, her fingers just visible in the top of the mirror's frame. "I assure you, *Madam* Umbridge, my son does indeed exist."

Draco grinned as his mum returned the insult to the Ministry toad with interest.

"Then why, *Madam* Black, can we find no trace of him here at Hogwarts, where I have been assured he has been a student for the past year?"

"Because, *Madam* Umbridge, he feels absolutely no sense of obligation towards your precious Ministry, and he decided that instead of allowing himself to be questioned when he has done no wrong, he would prefer to disappear!"

"Ah-ha!" Umbridge pounced. "So you know where he went!"

"Have I said that?" Mum's voice turned glacially cold. "I never said that, nor do I mean it. I have no idea where Draco is at the present time, and neither do his teachers, as they have told you before. He told no one where he was going, he simply went, and I tend to believe that he will

return if and only if he feels safe in so doing. When that happens—no, *if* it happens—if you still have questions for him, *request* that he come to the Ministry to answer them, and he will consider that request as the young gentleman I know he is.”

All eyes turned to Draco. He hooked a thumb at the mirror. “Her words, not mine.”

“We cannot take the time for the niceties of requests and considerations,” Umbridge lectured. “Hundreds of innocent people are in danger from dementors. Thousands could be Kissed this very night. We have reason to believe your son holds the key to stopping this menace, and we will not rest until we have it safe in our possession!”

“Come now, Dolores,” said Professor McGonagall irritably, “do you really think any of us would hide such a thing? If Draco holds any such key, it’s likely to be some action only he can perform, not simply a piece of knowledge anyone could use.”

“And this is magic, not Muggle chemistry,” Professor Riddle added. “Success or failure may hinge on having the proper person in the proper place *at the proper time* .” He emphasized the last few words heavily. “We have reason to believe that the proper time is not yet. Soon, but not yet. Draco has other tasks he must perform before the time is right.”

“So.” Umbridge looked from one of them to the next, her toady little eyes glittering strangely, as with excitement. “This is your final answer, is it? You refuse to give him up to me—to us? To the Ministry of Magic, the lawful magical governing body of our land?”

“We cannot give up to you what we cannot find ourselves,” said Dumbledore. “That is our final answer. Not refusal, but inability to comply.”

“It amounts to the same thing.” Umbridge’s voice grew silky-soft. “How long have you been planning this, Dumbledore? How long have you been hoping for an opportunity to stand alone, to try your rights as holder of the castle? To see how many would come to you, and how many would remain loyal to the Ministry?”

“Causing a power struggle in our ranks at this point would be disastrous.” Dumbledore’s calm seemed boundless, washing even through the mirror link and quieting the rebellious murmurs of the assembled students. “We must stand united against the dementors, or we will become as they.”

“If you really believe that, I suggest you produce the Malfoy boy in short order,” Umbridge said, drawing herself up to her fullest height and eliciting quite a lot of giggles from the girls in the audience. “Otherwise you’ll have dementors at your gates within the week, and not one speck of help from us will you get.”

And with a swish of her pink robes, the Undersecretary swept out of the scene.

The mirror went blank, and Harry removed the spells and reclaimed it as the students started discussing what they’d heard. Draco leaned casually against the wall and let it envelop him, then bulge out to form a tiny room around him. Abby slipped in after him, coming to his side to rest

her head against him and put her arms around his waist.

“They can’t have you,” she whispered, the plural pronoun encompassing the whole world outside Abigail Beauvoi and those she deemed worthy. “I won’t let them.”

“Good to know.” Draco tweaked one brown curl. “I don’t know why I didn’t just ask Mum to fix my sleep so I stay in the world where there’s no one looking for me...”

Abby tilted her head to look up at him.

“All right, all right, I do know,” Draco admitted. “It... it feels wrong there now. Nothing intrusive or big, but it’s there. It’s nothing that happens, it’s more like something missing. Like a sound or a feeling that stops being there.”

“Family,” said Abby with certainty. “It’s the feeling of family. You joined ours almost a week ago, remember? And it made you stronger, your soul, your magic. It’s why the dementors noticed you all of a sudden, because your magic got strong.” She smiled at him. “Because you have all of us to help you. You’re one of us now, even more than when Aunt Cecy adopted you.”

“That does make sense.” Draco cuddled the girl to him, musing idly how far he’d come since the morning he’d awakened to her startled scream.

*I never thought then I’d even like it here, much less belong. But I do. There’s a place for me here, me and Luna, and none where I was born. So it’s here we’re coming, and here we’ll find a way to stay, and stay together.*

*Somehow.*

*Though it might be all right staying behind, as long as Luna was with me. We’d make it work there too. Somehow.*

“The world you came from might be dark, but it still has light,” Abby murmured, as though she’d read his mind. “Even when I visited it with you, Luna was there to save us from the dementors...”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, Luna didn’t tell you about that?” Abby grinned cheekily. “I guess I get to tell, then.”

“Yes, you most certainly do.” Draco sat down on the floor, pulling Abby into his lap. “Tell away, and don’t leave anything out, on pain of tickling.”

Abby squealed once from the mere mention of the word and began to tell.

## Be Careful 91: How You Get Down

Draco leaned on a windowsill in the Owlery, brushing a stray feather across his palm and enjoying his last full day of quiet. Tomorrow by the calendar, the day after tomorrow on his personal timeline, the students of acceptable bloodlines would filter back into Hogwarts, to be greeted by their black-haired Headmaster, their lumpen Dark Arts teacher, and his smirking sister with the lies she passed off as Muggle Studies.

*But it won't last much longer. Ten more days, that's all. Wish I had some way to tell everyone else that and have them believe me...*

Rustles and soft hoots behind him told him an owl had just arrived. Curious, he turned.

Feathers of shining white stood out clearly among the brown and tan of the other owls in the Owlery, who were edging away from the newcomer. As Draco watched, half-disbelieving, the snowy owl finished preening a wing and looked up. Her eyes were a shade of blue-gray not usually seen in birds, and filled with the same unmistakable joy he was sure inhabited his own.

“Luna,” he breathed, crossing to her. “Can you—no, you can't change back here, it isn't safe—and what are you even doing here? Not that I'm not glad of it, but why put another use on your amulet just to see me?”

A white-feathered head shook.

“No? It wasn't just to see me?” Draco pulled a hurt face for a moment, and Luna hooted in laughter. “This isn't going to get us anywhere,” he said with a sigh. “We need to go somewhere we can talk, really talk.”

Luna bobbed her head up and down, then poked her beak in a particular direction. Draco followed its line with his eyes and frowned. “Hogsmeade? I guess that would do, if we're careful not to be seen, but how am I going to get out? They have all the secret passages covered...”

A swat to his chest with a wing sent him back a step. “Hey! What was that for?”

The same wing pointed at him, then swept downwards, coming around at the end to point towards Luna herself. “Me, down, you,” Draco repeated aloud, twirling the feather between his fingers. “You know, this'd make a great party game. Right up there with ‘Guess My Patronus’ and ‘Guess

My Animagus'—”

The feather drifted away on a gust of wind as its holder vanished, replaced by a small grey streak of fur headed for the stairs. Luna gave her soft hoot of laughter again and took wing, flapping towards Hogsmeade.

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The barman of the Hog's Head was enjoying a quiet pint by himself in the kitchen when his own surname caught his ear. It was spoken in a girl's voice filled with laughter, and it had come through the open window which overlooked the alley behind the pub. Setting down his mug, he moved nearer to listen.

“...good thing Ray and Starwing looked back and found out he wanted to talk to me,” the girl was saying reproachfully. “Bad Draco, to forget to tell me such an important thing.”

“Yes, yes, bad me,” said a boy in tones dripping sadness. “What did he want to talk to you about?”

“Oh, quite a lot of things. Some messages for you. One is that you should think about what you know of Professor Snape, that it might help you work out why you're so interested in a certain object. And another that's very, very important—you need to have the diadem before Harry and the others and I come to Hogwarts, because you have to challenge Harry to a duel over it, and you have to win.”

“I *what* ?” The boy's voice rose into a squawk of surprise. “Luna, I can't do that!”

“You're going to have to. He can't win unless you do.”

A long sigh. “Great. Talk about achieving your dreams at the moment they stop having meaning. Anything else?”

“Just that it would be best if you were to do the first part of what you're thinking of doing with Hermione today. She's strong enough now to listen and understand, and it will have more than a week to settle in so that the second step will take right away.”

“That's assuming she doesn't hex me on sight,” muttered the boy. “All right, all aboard for my auntie's house. My sane auntie.”

“Yes, please, I don't think I want to see your mad aunt again...” A light laugh, cut off by the branch-breaking crack of a Disapparition.

The barman snorted once and went to refill his mug. The conversation might have meaning to others, but he wasn't in the mood to recount it to them, not even if it meant he might understand it better. In his experience, explanations paid for with trouble were seldom worth the price.

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Hermione was in the middle of reading the Act I Finale when she heard the knock on the door.

“Come in!” she called without taking her eyes off the page, with its three columns of tiny type all meant to be sung simultaneously. “How do they keep it all straight?” she said musingly to herself as the door opened. “Wouldn’t they end up singing each other’s words by accident?”

“Sometimes they do,” said Luna, shutting the door behind herself. “But everything is always so mixed-up that no one can tell. I’ve brought someone to see you.”

“To see me?” Hermione looked up and smiled. “Hello, Luke.”

The mongoose, perched on Luna’s shoulder, gave a nervous chit-chit for answer and leapt down. Halfway through his fall, there was—if it hadn’t been so absurd, Hermione would have called it a flash of darkness—and a boy her own age hit the floor hard, fair hair flopping over his flushed face as he lay on his back.

“Grace, delicacy, and poise,” he said breathlessly. “Three things I seem to have left behind in my dorm today.” He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on one elbow, wincing. “Ow.” Grey eyes blinked back their slight extra shine, then focused on Hermione and joined in the smile his lips had started. “Hello.”

*“Hello”? You’re going to marry one of my best friends, the last time we met you destroyed my ability to take care of myself but saved my life, you spun this absurd tale about the horrible things you’d do to me which fit with the way you’ve behaved to me for six years, but I’ve since found out that was really because you wanted to be my friend yourself—and the best thing you can think to say to me now is “Hello”?*

“Hello,” Hermione answered.

*I suppose absurdity is catching.*

Luna had left again. They were entirely alone. To keep from staring, Hermione looked down at the book in her lap. “Why do they suddenly sing about poetry?” she asked.

“Why not?” Her companion sat up, shaking his hair back. “They’re unusual pirates, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed.” Hermione battled with her better instincts and lost. “They say it takes one to know one.”

“What, me? I’d like to think I’m getting more usual, not less.” Draco Malfoy arched his back, sighed in relief, and scooted closer to her, craning his neck to see the book. Hermione obligingly turned it. “Thank you. Developing a few interests outside my ‘sacred family name and bloodline’, that sort of thing.”

“You sound like Sirius,” said Hermione before she could stop herself.

He twitched his eyebrows. “Do I?”

“Yes. He used to be just that sarcastic about purebloods and the way they think.”

“Well, then, good for me.” Draco glanced at her and looked away, his cheeks flaring pink again.

“Is it so hard for you?” Hermione said acerbically. “Sitting next to a—”

“Please,” Draco cut her off, his voice thick with an emotion she hardly dared identify. “It’s nothing to do with that, I swear. I *know* what I used to sound like, how much of a fool I used to make of myself, and it doesn’t sound any better coming from you.”

It was Hermione’s turn to flush. “I was being just as bad, wasn’t I?” she said. “Only in reverse. Backwards snobbery.”

“At least you have the courage to admit it. It took me a month and getting hit in the face to come to that point.”

She looked sidelong at him. “That sounds like a story I wouldn’t mind hearing.”

He grinned. “Because I worked out it doesn’t matter what people’s blood is, or because I got hit in the face?”

Surprised, she laughed. “A little of both, really.”

“Thought so. But for you to understand that story, I’d have to tell you the whole thing, and we don’t have time. You will find it out,” he added hastily. “I’ve made plans for that. Just not now, and not here.”

Hermione nodded. “Fair enough. But Luna said you’d come to see me...” She let the final word trail off, inviting him to take up the thread.

“Yes. Well.” Draco undid the clasp on his robes, sliding them off to reveal a very Muggle pair of jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the words “There wolf. There castle” and small pictures of these two things, arrows pointing them out. “Christmas present,” he explained at Hermione’s incredulous look. “From my godparents’ daughter—my godsister, I guess, if there is such a word.”

“There used to be.” Hermione tried to think what family would have been acceptable to the Malfoys as godparents to their only son while still retaining enough knowledge of Muggle culture to have a daughter who gave such presents, but gave it up as a bad job. “Women would say they were getting together to talk with their godsiblings, or their godsibs for short, and the word got corrupted and came to mean the kind of talk they did together.”

“Godsibs,” Draco repeated, frowning in thought. “Gossibs... gossip? I never knew that.”

“Now you do.” Hermione shut the book still sitting on her lap and set it aside. “Tell me more about your gossip.”

“She reminds me a lot of you.” He smirked for a second, as at some private joke. “But she’s the

oldest of a big family. Second oldest, really, she has a twin brother who's a couple minutes older, but they don't play for precedence like that unless they're teasing. And she's married, she eloped with her boyfriend on her birthday over the summer, though you can't really call it eloping when they did it out in full view of everyone. In any case, they got right down to business, she's going to have a baby this fall, and if they're anything like either of their parents, it's only the first of many..."

"It sounds like you really care for them," Hermione said when he was silent for a few moments.

"I know, shocking, right?" His smile invited her to share the joke. "But it's true. If I know anything about caring for other people, it's because of them. And one other person... but I said I wasn't going to get into that now, and I'm not. I came here on business. In a way." He held out his hand, palm up. "May I?" he said, indicating her right arm.

Hermione moved closer to him and laid her wrist in his grasp. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Draco laughed once. "For what? Stopping you ever using a wand again?"

"Stopping me *dying*," Hermione retorted. "Don't think I can't slap you just as well with my left."

"Mercy!" He pretended to cower, making her giggle, then sat back up, his face straightening out. "I don't know how much you know about the night you escaped," he said. "Do you know who was able to tell Aunt Andromeda what you'd been hurt with?"

"Yes, it was Luna. She said she'd seen someone else hurt with Fiendfyre..." Hermione stopped as a conclusion came to her. "You?"

"Me." Draco took her remaining hand in his other one and guided it to a spot just above his left elbow, where a line like a scar was just tangible. "And I want to help you the way I was helped. But it'll have to be a bit different, since all I have to work with is my own, and that's why I'm here." His hand went to his pocket and drew out a tiny silver knife, of the sort they used in Potions class. "To ask if you'd be willing to make one piece of my terrible story the truth."

## Be Careful 92: What You Do Well

“Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam...”

“Shut up!” screeched Alecto Carrow, swatting at Peeves with a broomstick without even dislodging his Viking helmet. “Shut up!”

Cackling through his song, Peeves swooped from side to side of the entrance hall, over the heads of the students who were filing in from the carriages. “Lovely Spam!” he caroled, off-key as usual. “Wonderful Spam!”

“Bloody poltergeist!” Alecto hurled her broom at Peeves and stomped into the Great Hall, the lines of her back daring anyone to laugh. Checking the crowd from the corner of his eye, Neville could see quite a few sets of shaking shoulders, several hands over mouths, and at least one person biting the collar of his robes (Seamus), but everyone had managed to maintain the diplomatic silence which seemed to be the best policy around the Carrows.

*Even more so right now.*

The news of the happenings at Malfoy Manor had spread around the wizarding world like Fiendfyre, though Neville thought he could discount a few of the wilder twistings of the tale, such as Ron strangling Wormtail with his bare hands or Draco embracing Hermione as a long-lost sister. Still, it seemed to be established fact that Ron and Hermione had been caught, and had then escaped, destroying the Manor and killing Peter Pettigrew and most of a Snatcher team in the process.

*And some people are saying Narcissa Malfoy too. Though Gran got a letter last night from one of her friends claiming that death wasn't any accident...*

Without noticing it, he'd drifted towards the staircase which led to the dungeons, where a fair-haired boy lounged in a practiced attitude of boredom. “Longbottom,” he drawled as Neville got close enough to hear. “Good holiday?”

“Passable.” Neville weighed his options and decided forward was the only safe direction. “I'm sorry about your mother.”

“Thanks.” The gray eyes held an unguarded sorrow for one brief instant before resuming their

hooded look. “But she’s well out of it now. The person you should be feeling sorry for is my father.”

“Oh?”

“Oh.” Right hand massaged left forearm in a long-practiced motion. “He killed her. On his precious Dark Lord’s orders. Because we’d failed him one too many times.”

*Just in case I still had any doubts about his loyalties.*

Neville inclined his head and started towards the Great Hall, but a hand closed around his sleeve, detaining him. “Keep your ears open,” said the voice of Reflection from behind him. “They’re thinking about families now. They won’t stop with mine.”

The expected twisting jerk sent Neville spinning away across the entrance hall, but he regained his balance quickly, without the need of the hand Hannah put out to catch him. Getting his breath back, he watched his ally stalk through the doors of the Great Hall.

*Thinking about families... Gran can take care of herself, but they don’t know that...*

“Are you all right?” Hannah asked worriedly. “He didn’t hex you?”

“No, he didn’t hex me.” Neville started towards the Great Hall himself, still half-lost in his thoughts. *If they threaten Gran to bring me in line, and she curses her way out of trouble and goes on the run like the Order...*

*What then?*

He had a feeling he’d better figure out the answer to that question, and fast.

---

Harry walked into the back room of Andromeda Tonks’ house to discover most of the rest of its occupants laughing helplessly. “Should I come back later?” he inquired.

“No, stay.” Hermione got herself halfway under control and beckoned for him to come and sit next to her. “Ginny was looking over my shoulder while I was reading, and she started saying these lines...” She pointed at the right-hand page of the enormous book open in her lap. “...like Lucius Malfoy.”

“She’s a bit scary,” said Ron, sitting up, his face rather red but his eyes less troubled than Harry could remember seeing them for months. “It really sounds like him. Gin, want to try the Evil Overlord List in that voice next?”

“Sure. But let me do this for Harry first.” Ginny took the book from Hermione and sat up very straight. Though she could not change her sex, or the color of her hair (Tonks, on the sofa with Lupin and Teddy, had turned her own blonde in honor of the occasion), she seemed to gain twenty-

five years of age and an enormous amount of dignity simply by the movement.

Then she began to speak.

“I am, in point of fact,” a crisply careful pureblood accent enunciated, “a particularly haughty and exclusive person, of pre-Adamite ancestral descent. You will understand this when I tell you that I can trace my ancestry back to a protoplasmal primordial atomic globule.”

Harry muffled his snickers in the sleeve of his robe, not wanting to interrupt Ginny’s flow.

“Consequently, my family pride is something inconceivable. I can’t help it. I was born sneering.” As if to prove it, Ginny wrinkled her face into a particularly good specimen of the expression. “But!” She held up an admonishing finger. “I struggle hard to overcome this defect. I mortify my pride continually. I go and dine with…” It seemed to pain her to say it, but she managed. “...*half-blood* people on reasonable terms. I dance at cheap suburban parties for a moderate fee.” Raising her hands above her head, she snapped her fingers twice on each side of her. “I also retail the Dark Lord’s secrets at a very low figure.” She leaned towards Harry. “For instance, any further information about *Won-Won* would come under the head of the Dark Lord’s secret.”

“Oy!” Ron protested over Harry, Hermione, Lupin, and Tonks’ laughter.

“I don’t think so, Ginny,” Harry said when he’d caught his breath. “Some things are too disgusting even for You-Know-Who.”

Ron folded his arms and glared, but Harry could see the tell-tale twitching at the corners of his friend’s mouth; the anger was mostly for show, and would be gone as soon as the subject of the conversation turned to someone else.

*A few more days of this and we’ll be ready to take on the world.*

---

Sitting alone upstairs, Luna smiled.

“Ginny is very good,” she said quietly to herself. “But my Draco does it better.”

---

Draco sat at a table in the library, studying the soul flask and wishing he didn’t have the uncomfortable feeling that it was studying him back.

*It’s not charged,* he reminded himself. *It’s not powered. It can’t do anything to me.*

Unfortunately, unless he could find out how to power it, it wouldn’t do anything to the person he intended it for either.

*Snape is such a prat.* Out of instinct, he checked to both sides of him, making sure the Headmaster hadn’t crept up on him, before he allowed his thoughts to go on. *Not just thinking Mum isn’t real,*

*that much I can understand, but believing he can't ever be happy, that the only thing left for him in the world is to die? That's more than a little messed up.*

It was a form of 'messed up' with which he had personal experience, Draco acknowledged, so he could sympathize even though he couldn't condone.

*And I can use it. I have to use it. Otherwise, even if I get him to come with me, he'll see the otherworld as a trick or a trap, and he'll never stop looking for the catch to it all, for the one impossibility that means it can't be real...*

Apropos of nothing, his mind presented him with an image of Hermione during the hour they'd spent together, laughing with abandon at his imitation of Lucius. "That's just awful," she said, wiping away tears of laughter from her eyes. "I don't envy Luna one bit—you're impossible, really you are..."

*All right, there's the connection, she said impossible. But that's pretty tenuous. Is there anything else?*

He stared at his distorted reflection in the soul flask. *Hermione. Impossible. Is it something that's impossible for her, something that would be impossible without her, something she thinks is impossible—*

*Yes. That's it, that last one. Something she thinks, something she's said, is impossible. But I've seen it done. I know who can do it. And they're the key to this little puzzle.*

Draco picked up the soul flask and cradled it in his hands. "It was impossible for someone to get past the Healers at St. Mungo's without being seen," he said to it. "Because St. Mungo's is warded against Apparition. Just like Hogwarts. Just like Hermione always used to tell Ron and Harry and everyone else within earshot." He lifted the flask, watching his reflected cheeks bulge and his ears stick out. "But those wards only hold up against wizards and witches..."

---

"Rivvy," Cecy said promptly, a slight frown on her face as she sorted through years of memories. "Our house-elf's name was Rivvy. Poor creature, she worshiped Bella, and nearly went out of her mind when Bella became a Blood Purist. We had to send her into retirement early when she began to drop dishes and forget her work with fretting over her lost mistress."

*Not to mention taking a potential weapon out of Bella's hands. House-elves are generally peaceable creatures, but they can do a great deal of damage if they are ordered to.*

"Is she still around?" Draco asked, one hand in the pocket of his robes.

"Andrea takes care of her now, and at the last I heard Rivvy was in reasonably good health for her age. Why do you ask?"

For answer, Draco produced an object about which Cecy had heard a great deal. "I think I've

solved the mystery,” he said, holding out the soul flask to her. “None of us could get this to respond at all. What if it was never made to work off human magic in the first place?”

Suppressing a shudder, Cecy accepted the flask. The traces of Dark magic on it were still noticeable to her, but faint and faded, overlaid by the wardings that Albus and Tom had laid on it while studying it. And yes, there, very distant but just perceptible if one knew what one was searching for—

“I think you may be right,” she said, and was rewarded with her son’s brilliant smile. “Well done.”

---

Astoria Greengrass skirted the edge of the Slytherin common room, avoiding her happily gossiping sister Daphne, and met Graham Pritchard at the far side, suppressing the shiver of pleasure which always came over her at the sight of his dark hair and eyes. *He cared for Natalie, and I was Natalie’s friend. That’s all I can ever be to him, just Natalie’s friend.*

“Well?” Graham said in a soft tone which went no farther than Story’s own ears.

“You heard about Malfoy Manor.” It wasn’t a question. Anyone with any connection to the wizarding world at all had heard about Malfoy Manor. “Three Snatchers were killed in the collapse. One of them was Scabior.” Story leaned in. “They say Hermione Granger dropped a wall on his head. And that she invoked Natalie’s name when she did it.”

Graham’s smile was pure savagery. “I’ll have to shake her hand when I see her next,” he said. “I hadn’t thought her capable of that.”

“Nor had I.”

*And after what Malfoy promised me, I’m starting to wonder if she did it at all.*

“Everything is getting worse,” Graham’s voice broke into her thoughts. “Even Slytherins are beginning to turn on their own.”

“As well we should,” Story said bitterly, allowing her true feelings to show for this one moment with this one person. “Those who do these things, or condone their doing by silence—”

“Outnumber us ten to one,” Graham broke in, coldly practical as always. “If they can get proof of who we are, or even suspicion now, they will move quickly and we will have no chance. We need a plan.”

“Yes.” Story swallowed against her all-too-clear knowledge of what would happen to them if they were found out as traitors to their own kind and forced herself to think. “First we need to know exactly who is with us and who is not, and then we will have to find either a way off the grounds or a place within the school to hide...”

Thinking was good. As long as she could think, she would be safe from fear.

She knew in her heart and her gut that if she ever let that fear take her, she would not return.

## Be Careful 93: What You Work Out

“Malfoy.”

Draco slowed to a stop at the sound of his name spoken with utter precision in the coldest tones possible to achieve without a Freezing Spell. “Yes, Headmaster?” he said, turning.

Snape held up an object between thumb and forefinger. “Explain.”

“That’s called parch-ment,” said Draco in the tones he would have used to explain a fascinating new toy to little Nicki Beauvoi. “The markings on it are this thing called wri-ting. It’s a way to preserve communication past the present moment. You should try it sometime.”

“Your cheek does not interest me. These—” Snape shook the parchment, making it rattle. “—are the words to that ridiculous song about tinned meat Peeves has been singing for the past three days.”

“Are they?” Draco plastered a look of vague interest on his face and peered at the parchment as though he’d never seen it before.

“Written out in your handwriting,” Snape added.

*Damn.* Draco couldn’t stop the look of shock and worry from crossing his face, and didn’t try—as long as he avoided Snape’s eyes, it could be mistaken for ‘innocence accused’ when it was, in fact, ‘guilt swearing at itself for its stupidity.’

*If there was ever a time I didn’t need a cock-up, it’s now. I’ve been so careful to use other people’s writing all year, and just over a week left to go and I use my own. But it’s not over yet.*

“There are quills that will do that, sir,” Draco pointed out, still looking at the parchment. “The Weasley twins sell a very good line.”

“I have checked this parchment very thoroughly. No magic was used to create it.” Snape crumpled the sheet one-handed and thrust it into Draco’s left palm. “I doubt you will tell me where you obtained such arrant nonsense without more stringent methods than I am yet prepared to use, but I must say I thought better of you than this after the events of the holiday.”

Stung, Draco snapped his head up to meet Snape’s gaze. “So it’s wrong now to want a bit of fun?”

It's wrong to play a stupid, harmless joke? I'm glad I'm going to be leaving here soon if this is the way the school's going to be!"

"Lower your voice," Snape hissed.

"Yes, *sir* . Right away, *sir* ." Draco added enough sarcasm to the honorifics to choke a thestral. "Will the dungeons be low enough, *sir* , or should I dig a hole once I'm there?"

Snape flushed an unhealthy-looking yellow. "Out of my sight," he said through clenched teeth.

Draco threw a mocking salute, spun on his heel, and marched away.

*That probably should not have been as much fun as it was.*

---

The next afternoon, Neville was in the library with Seamus, Hannah, and Susan, discussing the day's Dark Arts class, when he felt his Galleon warm. Digging it out of his pocket, he found the beginning of the message.

*It's for me. But who would be sending me a message when we're back in school and they can just talk to me—*

He read to the end and felt his heart give a queer sort of double-thump against his ribs.

*That's who.*

"Who's R-E-F?" Seamus asked, frowning. "We don't have anyone with those initials, do we?"

"It means Reflection." Neville stood up and shouldered his bag. "From *Potterwatch* ."

"The one who does the bits about Harry?" said Hannah.

"That's him."

"He's a student?" Susan looked impressed. "Do you know who he is?"

"Yes, but there's no time." Neville started for the door. "If anyone asks—and they will—you haven't seen me since classes ended. You don't know where I am."

"Neville, what's going on?" Hannah's voice shook. "What's wrong?"

Neville looked back at her, giving silent thanks to whatever god had prompted him not to make his feelings about her public. "They're coming," he said simply.

Before any of them could respond, he was gone, up the hall and headed for the stairs, the message from the Galleon engraved in letters of fire on the insides of his eyelids every time he blinked.

*NL: Go now, avoid rush. Save room for others. Ref*

He'd made it up one flight, but there was still another to go before he was on the same level as Gryffindor Tower, and he was starting to hear shouts behind him—

*Don't listen. Just focus on getting there.*

“Go now” was obvious enough, and “avoid rush” had to mean the Carrows and their supporters wouldn't stop with him, but what did “Save room for others” mean? The Tower had plenty of room—

*But the Carrows are teachers. They have all the passwords. They can get into the Tower just as easily as they can get anywhere else in the school.*

His heart sank, even as his feet touched the seventh floor landing.

*Come on, Neville, think. You can't give up now. There's got to be a place you can hide, and still have room for the rest of the DA—*

Neville stopped for an instant, his mind connecting two words at the end of the sentence in a different way.

Then he was running.

There was one place in Hogwarts the Carrows still couldn't come.

He rounded the last corner, and there it was, the door in the wall opposite the tapestry with a troll doing a pirouette around its club. Feet pounded behind him as he snatched it open, spun himself around it, and slammed it shut. It melted away into unbroken stone, leaving no trace.

“Where'd he go?” Amycus Carrow bellowed on the other side of the wall. “Find him!”

“He came this way!” Alecto added. “Don't let him escape!”

*Too late.* Neville smirked, then turned it into a grimace at his Galleon, still clutched in his hand. *Save “Room” for others. Har har, Malfoy. Very funny.*

But pun or no pun, the hint had started his thoughts on the right track, and he was grateful. As long as he stayed here and “required” a safe place to hide, the Room would oblige, though like most long-running spells it was a bit literalistic.

*Just have to be careful what I ask for, that's all.*

After a full term's experience with the Room, Neville thought he could manage.

---

Draco spent a great deal of the next four days smirking himself. The DA hadn't taken terribly long

to figure out where their leader must have gone, and one by one they vanished as he had done, staggering their departures so as not to alert the teachers.

*Though most of them would probably help by this point. They want the Carrows gone as badly as we do.*

He knew, from the messages he intercepted with Luna's Galleon, that the Room had chosen to interpret Neville's requirement for its inhabitants to not be caught coming and going by varying where in the school it opened its magical door. Unfortunately, he also knew that there was no way he could exploit this to get at the diadem in the Room of Hiding, since the Room of Requirement would remain in its present form as long as there was anyone present in it.

*And since none of them are going to be ready to leave on my say-so, I'm as stuck as I was when Snape's troll ballerinas were keeping an eye open for me.*

For the umpteenth time, the idea of simply going to Snape and confessing all came into his mind, and for the umpteenth time he dismissed it. It looked simple, it should have been simple, but a problem involving people was only as simple as the people involved. Severus Snape was far from simple, and like most people, judged everyone by himself.

*He'll think I'm doing it on the Dark Lord's orders, to test his loyalty. Even if I let him see my memories, he'll be sure they were implanted or faked up somehow. He trusts me more now than he did before, but it's not enough, not for this. I have to finish it alone.*

Draco raked his hands through his hair. *It doesn't help that the place I used to be able to rest has its own problems now...*

Wards against dementors were falling at an alarming rate all over the otherworld. As the panic over wise dementors spread, it sapped the joy which powered the wards, resulting in weak spots the wise dementors could and did exploit. More and more people were taking to skyships, some of which hadn't been used in years or should never have been built at all. Two families had already been killed in crashes, and one person had been Kissed when his fall was partly cushioned by some soft branches. The marriage law looked like a sure thing to pass within the month, and the government was starting to talk about mandating skyship usage between dusk and dawn.

*They need their hero. Someone to bring them hope again. If they just have hope, they can get the wards back up, they can strike darkness a blow and drive it back all by themselves, they don't need anyone special to do it for them. But they think they do, so they do. Self-defeating prophecy.*

Draco sighed, laying his head down on the table. *Life was so much easier when all I had to worry about was making Harry look like a prat as many different ways as I could.*

---

Remus Lupin rubbed at the back of his skull, just over the left headache bump, as his mother had called them. He knew the itch he was trying to scratch was mental, but that didn't change his natural reaction to it.

*At least full moon isn't for another two weeks. The bond will have plenty of time to settle in before then.*

He still couldn't believe he'd agreed to Dora's plan. It was insane, absolutely insane, and in a last-ditch effort to save her from herself he'd 'mis-laid' the papers on which the spells were written. Dora had given him a look which made her resemble her mother more than he'd thought possible without her using Metamorphmagic, then Summoned them and handed them to him ceremoniously. He'd known in that moment he was beaten.

*No, to be fair, I knew that long since. I've only been kicking against the inevitable.*

They had performed the spells in careful unison, wands pointed towards one another's hearts, and no sooner had they finished than Remus had felt a strong tickling sensation on the back left quadrant of his head. He'd reached up to scratch it—

Only to have Dora's hand rise in simultaneous motion to the back of her own head.

Quick experimentation had proved they were only yoked in movement when one of them was distracted and the other concentrating on something. More trials, and the hints written beneath the spells on the parchments, had helped them along the way to understanding the strange power of communication the bond allowed through the sending and receiving of strong emotions.

*That little minx.* Remus smiled affectionately, massaging the itchy spot. *She decided to see how much the bond could bear, so she opened it up to show me what she feels for me. Without telling me first, of course.*

He'd nearly been blown off his feet by the wave of love/desire/joy/protectiveness/possessiveness he'd sensed emanating from his wife's compact form. Without thinking, he had opened his own mind in response, letting her see the affection which had flourished despite his every attempt to kill it, his desperate desire to keep her and their son safe in a world gone mad, his longing to somehow redeem his friends' lost lives by living as they should have had the chance to do...

"Tonks itchy?" Harry asked from his place across the kitchen table.

"No, not exactly." Remus made a conscious effort and brought his hand down to rest on the tabletop. "It seems to be a somatic reaction to the bonding spell. I'm sure it will wear off."

The sight of Harry, as always, brought James and Lily forcibly to Remus' mind, which then darted down tangent corridors of memory, always one corner ahead of his pursuing consciousness. Sirius and Peter, pranks in dark hallways and sunlit rooms, pranks in revenge for pranks which were in turn revenge for other pranks, usually pranks against one student in particular...

"It strikes me we may be going at this the wrong way," Remus heard himself say, just as his consciousness caught up with his mind.

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

“Anything special about Hogwarts I would know, so would Wormtail have known, so the Death Eaters will have guarded against it. Also, my practical knowledge of the castle is quite a few years out of date, and even yours is somewhat rusty. Neither of us knows what security is like now that Snape is Headmaster.” Remus noted the tightening of muscles around Harry’s jaw at the name and made haste to move on. “Maybe we should talk to the people who’ve experienced it.”

“Luna and Ginny?”

“That is who I mean.”

Harry was already drawing his wand to send a messenger-Patronus.

The girls joined them in the kitchen in short order, but neither had anything at all hopeful to say at first. “They’ve got dementors and Death Eaters both, stationed at every way in or out,” Ginny said bluntly. “They bragged about it the first night back, pretending it was to keep us safe, when all the time we knew it was to keep us there, under their thumbs and being indoctrinated with their garbage.”

“I suppose we might have been able to creep in with the students coming back from the holidays, if we’d thought of it in time,” Luna added. “But we didn’t, so that’s no good.”

Harry sighed and slumped across the table. “Hogsmeade weekend?” he suggested in the tone of one trying to keep a forlorn hope in the air just a few seconds longer. “Polyjuice ourselves into people who belong there, the way Ron and Hermione were the day you joined up, Ginny?”

“Wait,” Remus said in confusion. “I thought Ginny had been banned from Hogsmeade.”

“I was,” said Ginny, and scowled in uncanny imitation of Snape. ““When you prove yourself worthy of such a privilege, I will consider reinstating it, Miss Weasley,”” she said in dark, crisp tones. ““Until then, you would do better to remain in the castle.””

“How did you get out with the Sorting Hat, then?”

“Kreacher brought her,” Luna said. “He’s Harry’s elf now, so he does as Harry says, and Harry told him to take Ginny somewhere safe.”

“Thank you, Luna,” Harry muttered as Ginny blushed.

“Kreacher brought her.” Remus began to smile. “And is he still at Hogwarts, do you know, Harry?”

“I guess. He must’ve gone there when we had to run from Grimmauld Place.” Harry smiled reminiscently. “Wonder how he gets on with Dobby these days. They probably don’t fight anymore, now that Kreacher isn’t badmouthing me every ten seconds.”

“Dobby. That’s the elf who used to belong to the Malfoys? And he works at Hogwarts now?”

Harry nodded in response to both questions. “Why?” he asked.

Ginny gasped suddenly. “That’s it!”

Luna beamed. “I knew you’d figure something out in time,” she said. “May I borrow your Galleon for a moment, Ginny?”

Remus tuned out this rather puzzling exchange in favor of watching Harry as his eyes lightened in understanding, exactly the way Lily’s had always done when she rounded the final corner of some maze of magic and saw her objective in sight.

“House-elves can Apparate at Hogwarts,” the young man said quietly. “And they can carry passengers. And Kreacher’s my elf, which means he’ll come when I call him, and I don’t think he’ll mind going back for Dobby...”

“Healer Tonks says Hermione should be well enough to travel within a few days,” Ginny put in. “Hermione thinks she’s well enough now, but that’s just Hermione being Hermione.”

“A few days it is.” Harry grinned a grin that was all his own, neither James’ nor Lily’s but a bit of both and a good portion of neither. “Then we can finally get what we’re after, and end this war for good.”

## Be Careful 94: What Proof You Seek

“Let me make myself perfectly clear, Severus Prince Snape, since you seem incapable of taking hints on the matter.” Cecilia had her hands on her hips, and her chin jutted towards him in a rare sign of bad temper. “The only time I become tired of your company is when you ask me if I am. Your company is always welcome to me, and on the rare occasions when it is not I will tell you so myself and give you a time when it will be once again. Do we now understand one another?”

Severus got his amusement at her posture under control and nodded. “Understand, certainly. Believe...” He turned to look out the windows of the Headmaster’s office, where they had met one another tonight. “Belief takes time,” he said quietly. “As ludicrous as that sounds, after more than sixteen years.”

Light footsteps behind him, and she was there, gazing out at the grounds. “I feel sometimes that I have failed you,” she said.

“Failed me? You?” Severus turned to her in honest astonishment. “How?”

“You came to me for help and healing over the death of the woman you loved.” Cecy looked up at him, her eyes bleak. “And I fell in love with you myself. I cannot help feeling sometimes that I must touch a nerve with you, that I must remind you of her...”

“Only in good ways,” Severus assured her. “Or perhaps a bit of your temper derives from her.”

He realized too late what his words implied, as she frowned. “Derives?”

“A figure of speech,” he said quickly.

“If you say so.” She sighed once, then stepped closer to him, leaning her head against his shoulder. He slid his arm around her, the contours of back and side familiar to his fingers.

*Yes, my dearest love, derives. The words, bitter, mocking, rang inside his head. You are nothing more than a toy of my imagination, created out of my great need, made from scraps of thought and fantasy. The failure here is not your falling in love with me, for you think us both real. It is my falling in love with you, when I have known all along that you are not...*

Trying to banish such thoughts, he sought about for another topic, and found one. “Have I told you about the latest misadventures of my problem child?” he asked.

“No, do enlighten me.” Mischief sparked in her smile. “Has he set all the suits of armor to dancing about on tables?”

“Not yet,” Severus said darkly. “Though I have no doubt it is only a matter of time. No, but what he has done baffles me far more than that would. That is a magical prank, and would be easily conceived by the mind of a pureblood. His jokes mix the magical and the Muggle world astonishingly for a boy who was raised in the most isolationist of homes. He seems particularly fond of a certain group of comedians whose work I am sure you know, but who would never be tolerated by any pureblood group, though I believe some of them had magical ancestry and may even have been wizards themselves.”

“Ah yes, I know who you mean.” Cecy laughed softly. “Go on.”

Severus described the song and its first public performance, to which Alecto had accidentally added the perfect counterpoint, then added his discovery of the written lyrics, in his problem child’s handwriting, lying on a table in the library. “And this is not the only time he has shown knowledge beyond what he should own,” he said. “Certain music I have heard him whistle, jokes or quotations he has mentioned... unless he has been sneaking into the Muggle world when his parents were not looking, I cannot account for it.”

“Why could he not have been?” Cecy asked. “The lure of the forbidden has always drawn the young. All the more if they feel they have something to prove, and he certainly does.”

“Something to prove, yes.” Severus shook his head. “I thought he was trying to prove himself with Miss Lovegood—I believe I mentioned her around Christmas time?”

“The girl he rescued from the adults who were tormenting her, then took to his own bedroom.” Cecy smiled mysteriously. “I remember it well.”

“Yes, but it seems he did not destroy her spirit as far as he thought. Or perhaps she recovered afterwards, or took heart when she saw her friends again...” Severus shrugged the shoulder not currently occupied by a blonde head. “I have no idea, but she certainly seemed well-recovered when I opened the door of the manor house for her to enter with those of her friends who had not been captured, to rescue those who had been.”

“So perhaps he never tried to break her spirit at all,” Cecy suggested. “Perhaps he only made you believe that he had, so that your story would satisfy the rest of the world as to his intentions, and he could carry on with his wooing of her in private.”

Severus considered this for a few moments. “I suppose that could make sense of it,” he said finally. “But it seems out of character for him.”

“For what you think of him, perhaps,” Cecy countered. “Broaden your mind, Severus! See beyond what you believe now! You have told me yourself about all the things that puzzle you concerning this boy—put them together! Look at the larger picture! He is more than what you thought, he must be, or none of this makes sense at all!”

“If I did not know better, I would think you cared about him.”

“Perhaps I do.” Cecy looked up at him, smiling ruefully. “Shall we talk about something else, since this obviously troubles us both?”

“We shall. And it is your turn to choose the subject.”

“Very well. Give me a few moments to think of one.”

“As you like.”

Severus let his mind wander in the silence, wondering if he might have conflated Narcissa’s obvious love for her son into his formation of Cecilia—but how would she know that the boy he was describing was Draco?

*Because I know it, of course. Though I have never named him to her, I think of him every time I speak about him, and she is part of my mind and knows my thoughts, if only subconsciously.*

The familiar uneasiness washed over him as he recalled his love’s true identity; ruthlessly, he kept it in the front of his mind. He could not, he could never, forget that she was unreal, save only in brief stolen moments.

*That way lies madness, and the self-inflicted sort is just as horrible as the sort conferred by others. I must retain my grip on reality, unless I wish to become a drooling idiot, or a recluse who lives wholly within his mind.*

“Ah!” Cecy’s soft exclamation brought his attention back to her, and he smiled at her bright eyes. “I have just the thing. We shall not *talk* any more at all.”

Her arm went around his neck and drew his face down towards her.

*For tonight, though, let the madness begin.*

*Morning is time enough to face the hell of my reality.*

---

Cecilia lay beside her love in the soft half-darkness of his quarters and cursed her contrary heart, which would not let this be enough.

*Some part of me knows it is a dream. Always, always, I know it is a dream. Even now that I know that he is real...*

*Though that has its own terrors. When he finds out that I am real, how will he react? What will he think of me? Will he believe I schemed and plotted to gain his heart, or will he accept the truth, that I, too, for most of our time together, thought him a creation of my fantasy?*

She pushed the thoughts away. *Enough. No more. Those things will come when they come; there is*

*no sense in my trying to live them before their time.*

Her slight motion of negation roused Severus, who shifted his position to look down at her. “I believe this is the point where I ask, ‘How was it for you?’” he inquired dryly.

Cecy laughed. “It was as it always is, an experience worthy of any woman in the world,” she said, craning her neck up to kiss him. “I do love you so.”

“And I you, though I fear I do not say it enough.”

She shook her head. “You say it enough that I am sure of its truth, but not so often that I wonder whom you are trying to convince with repetitions, me or yourself. In point of fact, my love, in all ways but one you comport yourself as a model husband.”

“And what one way might that be?” Severus’ eyes sparked with amusement, an expression Cecy knew his students had never seen.

“Oh, did I say one?” She pretended shock. “I meant many, of course, for you have a great many faults. Your untidiness, your lack of punctuality, your dislike of children—”

“Dislike of children?” he interrupted. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“From your frequent, sarcastic tirades on the subject of your students.”

“Students and children are hardly synonymous.” He brushed a piece of hair out of his face. “I admit I dislike most of the traits children are said to possess, such as the emitting of loud and random noises, the interruption of whatever nearby adults are doing with ideas and questions of their own, and the need for constant attention. But I think it might be possible to train a child, to bring it up in such a way that these traits are minimized.” His hand moved to her hair, stroking it gently. “Or perhaps, if I grew attached to a child, I would not notice its faults so much.”

“Perhaps,” Cecy agreed, trying to control her racing heart. “I believe you mentioned something of the sort to me about this problem child of yours from school, the boy who so puzzles you. On the night his house fell, the night he saw his mother die, you came to me and you said that if he were truly the way he had seemed to you that night, that you would not be ashamed to call him your own son.”

“So I did.” Severus’ hand slowed and stopped, his face relaxing as he recalled.

“I swear to you,” Cecy murmured, “that night you saw his true self. Everything else has been only a blind, a game he plays to keep from being caught doing good.” She smiled, recalling an amusing coincidence she had discovered a few weeks ago. “By Oak and Ash and Thorn, I do swear it.”

Severus chuckled. “Swearing by my wand, are you?” he asked, looking down at her. “Or did you not recall it is oak?”

“I did, and mine is ash.”

“How funny.” He laughed again, obviously humoring her. “And who, then, is the thorn?”

“Draco, of course,” Cecy said, surprised that he hadn’t seen it right away. “Who did you—”

She stopped. Severus was staring at her, and the look in his eyes frightened her. “What is it?” she asked, sitting up.

“I have never used that name to you.” The words came out in a harsh whisper. “Not in this context. Not in this way. How do you know it?”

“I—” Cecilia scrambled out of the bed, snatching up her dressing gown. “I should go. I’ve said too much. Forgive me—”

“Cecilia—” He started for the door, trying to intercept her, but she was too quick. “Cecilia!”

The cry echoed in her ears as she missed her step on the stairs, as she stumbled into the blackness which appeared below her, as she fell and fell and—

Woke.

Her bed had never seemed so empty or so cold, though the tears that streaked her face were burning hot.

“Forgive me,” she whispered again to the unhearing air. “Forgive me.”

---

Severus moved through the routine of the next morning in a daze, listening with half an ear to the furious diatribe of Alecto Carrow on the continuing disappearances—today made the seventh day since Neville Longbottom had vanished, and a full twenty other students had now followed his lead—and nodding or interjecting a remark at appropriate moments. His mind was elsewhere.

*She not only knew my problem child’s identity, she mentioned the wood his wand was made from. Something I do not know, and have never known. I examined my memories this morning to make sure of that.*

*But is it true? Did she merely invent it, to finish her reference, or is it reality?*

*And if it is...*

“Yes, of course,” he said to Alecto, nodding absently to whatever she had just sputtered.

*If it is, what does that mean?*

Breakfast was over, and the students were standing up and heading for the doors. Severus leaned forward, watching Draco Malfoy fold his napkin and get up. Astoria Greengrass waved her hand, catching the boy’s attention, and he moved through the crowd to her side. A moment later, he nodded and stepped away, losing himself in the mass of students.

*Oh, no. You will not get away from me so easily.* Severus headed for the steps down from the dais, prepared to catch the boy before he slipped out the door—

“You want me, sir?”

It took all Severus’ self-control to keep from jumping a foot. “Yes,” he responded, turning to face Draco. “Let me see your—”

A middling-length, slender wand was produced. “Reasonably springy,” Draco said, twirling it between his fingers, then extending the grip to Severus. “Ten inches exactly. Unicorn tail hair core.”

“I see.” Severus examined the wand, obscurely proud that his hands were not shaking. “And the wood?”

“Hawthorn.” Draco leaned against the edge of the dais, perfectly at ease. “Also known as quickthorn, whitethorn, or just plain thorn.” He smirked one-sidedly, as though he knew why Severus was asking. “Will you excuse me, sir? I have a free period and I wanted to get some things ready to show Miss Greengrass this afternoon.”

“Of course.” Severus waved at the door. “Go.”

“My wand, sir?” Draco held out a hand. “I may need it.”

Unsure whether he wanted more to sentence this infuriating child to an afternoon scrubbing out cauldrons or laugh until his sides hurt at the absurdity of it all, Severus extended the wand silently. Draco accepted it, inclined his head, and loped towards the door.

*So.* Severus sat down on the steps of the dais, watching his problem child depart. *Now what?*

He had a feeling he would soon find out, and that he might wish he had not.

## Be Careful 95: What You Risk

Draco cast a longing glance over his shoulder at the beautiful day outside as he started down the stairs to the common room. Granted, he would have a chance to live it over again, and in a far friendlier place than this, but it still seemed a shame to waste such a sunny afternoon on working inside.

*But I promised. Story and her not-a-boyfriend want to learn how to make a Shield Charm last, and I said I'd teach them this afternoon. He smiled to himself, turning the final corner. Talk about leaving things to the last minute. The thirtieth is tomorrow.*

“Bald Mountain,” he said to the stone wall, which slid obediently aside.

The common room was deserted, except for Daphne Greengrass, who looked up from her book as he walked in and frowned. “Where's Story?” she asked.

“I was just going to ask you that. We were supposed to meet about now to go over Shield Charms.” Draco assumed his best innocent look, copied from Abby. “You should always use protection, you know.”

Daphne appeared not to have noticed the pun. Instead, her frown was deepening. “But I thought you'd sent your friends for her. They came and said you were ready...”

“Sent my friends? Which friends?”

“Crabbe and Goyle, of course—”

Draco cursed, making Daphne blanch. “When?” he demanded. “When was this?”

“I—I don't remember—”

“If you ever want to see your sister alive again, you'd better remember!”

“Alive? What—” Daphne gulped and looked at her wristwatch. “About twenty minutes ago, I think,” she said shakily.

“Twenty minutes. Fantastic.” Draco tightened his hand around the grip of his wand. “They could be anywhere by now. Wish I had some way to find out—”

His knuckle brushed against a cool curve of metal.

---

Neville was on his way back from the Hog's Head when he felt his Galleon heat up. He tugged it out and squinted at the message in the dim light of the passage.

*NL: Urgent. Use Map. Find Astoria Greengrass. Ref*

He sped up, drawing his wand as he went. Within seconds he was through the door and at his own hammock, pulling the Marauder's Map from the pouch where it hung. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he said, touching his wand's tip to the center of the tattered parchment.

*Astoria Greengrass. Why do I feel like I should know that name?*

---

"Perfect!" Draco shoved the Galleon back into his pocket, along with the items he'd Summoned from his dorm while waiting for Neville to respond, and seized Daphne's wrist. "I don't care what you feel, you're coming with me," he said, holding her gaze with his own. "You can tell them later I put you under Imperius, and if you try to fight me I will, but I can't do this alone and you're the only help available."

"What is it you think you have to do?" Daphne quavered. "Is Story in trouble?"

Draco kicked his usual sarcasm aside. It wouldn't help him now. "Yes," he said firmly. "She is. And I'm going to help her."

"Then I'll help you." Daphne reclaimed her arm and drew her own wand. "Show me where."

"This way." Draco led his yearmate out of the Slytherin dorms, storing for later his half-formed musings on the strange nature of family ties.

Two flights of stairs and an endless series of hallways later, they stood outside a closed door. Loud laughter was audible from within, mixed with angry, muffled shouts. As both noises died away, a third replaced them, one which made Draco grit his teeth and Daphne stifle a gasp. Someone beyond the door was breathing in the unmistakable pattern of "please dear God don't let me cry right now."

"Story," Daphne hissed. Draco nodded, acknowledging her expertise in the area.

"Had enough yet?" piped up a boy's voice, reedy yet confident, and Draco's lip curled as he recognized Theodore Nott's tones. "Going to admit you played that nasty prank back in January? Or do we have to stimulate your memory a bit more?"

"And what about my revenge on Ginny Weasley?" added Blaise Zabini. "She shouldn't have got away from me, or out of the castle at all. Are you going to confess to helping her?"

“How about the way none of the nasty Muggle-lovers seem to mind their detentions?” Pansy Parkinson threw in.

“Or them all getting away before Professor Carrow could question them properly about Harry Potter?” rumbled Millicent Bulstrode.

*Follow my lead*, Draco mouthed at Daphne. She looked puzzled, but nodded, and Draco unlocked the door with a tap of his wand and stepped inside.

“Really, now,” he said coolly, surveying the scene with disgust but no surprise. Crabbe was holding a shivering, half-conscious Story upright in the center of the room, while Graham Pritchard fought with Goyle in a back corner. The fourth year might be small, but he was giving a good accounting of himself. Most of the rest of the Slytherin seventh years were gaping at the intruders, though Zabini showed signs of recovery.

*He always was a quick one. Better talk fast.*

“You seriously thought a fourth year could have done all that? Seriously?” Draco shook his head pityingly. “And we're supposed to be the clever ones.” He snapped his fingers at Crabbe and Goyle, who, obedient to years of training, released their captives. The younger Greengrass girl sagged into her sister's arms, and Pritchard darted forward to help Daphne with her burden.

*Excellent. They're all together.*

*Now to do what a good trickster never should.*

*Repeat myself.*

“Miss Greengrass had nothing to do with any of the things you mentioned,” he said, thrusting a hand into his pocket. “All of it was done by someone else.”

“Who?” Nott asked with deep suspicion.

Draco smiled sweetly. “Me.”

He flung a handful of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder into the center of the room, and grasped Pritchard's sleeve in the same motion, hauling the other boy and the two Greengrasses out into the hall as pandemonium erupted in the room. Slamming the door, he threw three different Locking Charms onto it, the last one a tricky thing sealed with a rune that he'd learned from Hermione.

*Still, it won't hold them long, not when they all have wands. They'll be out of there soon.*

*We'll have to use the time productively.*

“Your other friends,” he said to Pritchard, who had backed away a few steps to let Daphne work on Story. “Where are they?”

“The library, most likely. We're quiet, so Madam Pince lets us stay there.” Pritchard held up a hand and watched it shake with morbid fascination. “I thought they were going to—”

“They might still, if we don't work fast,” Draco interrupted. “Where's your wand?”

Pritchard grimaced. “They broke it. Story's too. Jumped up and down on them, and laughed.”

Daphne looked up, her face set in hard lines. “Take mine,” she said, holding it out. “I don't deserve it. I should have listened to her, I should have believed her when she said they were dangerous...” Her voice squeaked on the last word, and she turned away, covering her face.

“Give it to her, then,” Pritchard said quietly. “If you want a way to apologize.”

“But that still leaves you without one,” Daphne objected, looking back around. “She won't be ready to fight for at least an hour, you can use it until then.”

“No, he's right,” Draco said, pulling the Galleon from his pocket again. “Give it to her. It might speed up her recovery.” He turned to Pritchard. “How many of you are there?”

“Counting Story and I? Twelve. Did you really—”

“More or less.” Draco laid his wand against the Galleon, working out the message in his head.

*NL: 13 fugitives, he sent finally. Can you take? Where is door? Ref*

“Thirteen,” he muttered aloud. “Hope that's not unlucky.”

“Thirteen what?” Daphne asked. “He just said there were only twelve—oh!” She broke off with a little squeal of understanding, which provided Draco a moment of perverse pleasure. Ditzzy his Housemate might be, but stupid she wasn't.

“You'd better stun me,” she said as Story began to stir. “That way I can claim you tricked me and I didn't understand what was going on.”

“I can do that.” Draco aimed his wand, only to be cut off by the heating of the Galleon.

*We can take, he read around the edge. Sixth floor across from boys' loo.*

Draco chuckled to himself. “So salvation lives across the hall from the Toilet of Doom, does it?”

“I thought you might want to know,” said Pritchard delicately. “You're not making any sense.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” Draco massaged his forehead for a second, pulling himself together. “All right, time to work. Daphne...”

Daphne promptly sat down with her back against the wall. “Gently, please,” she said. “And in the chest, not the face.”

“Yes ma'am.” Draco Stunned her, and took an instant to lay her down comfortably on the floor as she slumped. “Pritchard, you and I need to get Story to the library. From there, you take her and your friends up to the sixth floor. Find the boys' loo and wait there. Someone should be along to help you find a place to hide.”

“What about you?” Pritchard objected. “You can't just go back to the dorms after you pulled us out of there. They'll be after you worse than they were after us.”

“Oh, I'll be along. But someone's got to slow this lot down.” Draco nodded at the door, his hands being full of a woozy-looking Story. Pritchard got his shoulder under her other arm, and they hoisted her between them and started down the hall. “When we get to the library, I'll give you a couple things that might help you get there safely.”

*Things I never thought I'd part with.*

*But you do what you have to.*

---

The other ten of Pritchard and Story's group were uniformly younger than the two fourth years, and all seemed rather in awe of Draco. When he spotted a familiar face at the back of the group, Draco knew why.

“I remember you,” he said, pointing at a dark-haired first year boy. “You were bragging at the Opening Feast, about how much magic you knew and how well you'd do this year.”

The boy gulped and nodded. “My gran's a Muggle,” he confessed. “I thought maybe if I talked really big, nobody would ever bother to find it out.”

“That never works the way you want it to,” Draco said, putting on his professional older-brother look. “Trust me. Now, what's your name?”

“It's Negran, Michael Negran.”

“We call him Mike,” added a first year girl, smiling shyly at the boy, who made a face at her.

Draco had to be very stern with himself, but he did manage to keep from smiling. “Come here, Mike,” he said. “I have something for you.”

Mike came forward and received with all due reverence the wrinkled hand clasping its stub of candle. “It's a Hand of Glory,” he whispered. “I always wanted one of these.”

“Light your friends safely up to the sixth floor and into hiding, and it's yours to keep.” Draco held up his own hand. “My word on it.”

“Wow.” Mike took a quick step back, as though still not quite believing his luck.

“What about the rest of us?” asked Pritchard, nodding around at the group. “What do we do?”

“Go hands-on-shoulders after Mike, as quickly as you can.” Draco held up the packet containing the last of his Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. “I’ll be bringing up the rear and spraying this around, so they won’t be able to see where we’ve gone. With any luck, though, we’ll be in hiding before they ever find us. Let’s go.”

As the little group organized itself at the door, Draco held out his own wand to Pritchard. “Take it,” he said. “If they catch anyone, they’re going to catch me, and I’d like to know they can’t break this. I’m sort of attached to it.”

“But how’ll you fight without it?”

“I have my ways.” Draco grinned. “Trust me. They won’t know what hit them.”

---

Neville, shepherding the last of the new fugitives into the Room of Requirement, paused to listen to the noise coming from down the hall. It sounded like the entire staff of St. Mungo’s trying to catch a small, hyperactive, hungry rabbit.

*Never mind how I know what that sounds like.*

Shutting the door behind himself, he ascended the staircase to the Room, where the new arrivals were babbling hysterically to anyone who would listen.

“—caught up and he told us to run—”

“—fighting all of them alone—”

“—doesn’t even have a wand—”

“—have to help him, please—”

“Hang on a tick, help who?” Michael Corner’s voice rang out over the noise. “*Draco Malfoy?* You want us to go out and help him?”

“He helped us,” said the oldest of the boys, drawing himself up proudly. “He tricked eight people to save my life and Astoria’s. Now he’s fighting those same eight to give us time to reach here.”

Neville glanced at the Map, which he hadn’t turned off. The tiny dot labeled “Draco Malfoy” was almost invisible beneath other dots labeled “Vincent Crabbe,” “Gregory Goyle,” Blaise Zabini,” “Millicent Bulstrode”...

Around the Room, the murmuring began.

“...been a bastard since we’ve been at school...”

“...pureblood and proud, always has been...”

“...a Slytherin, we know what they are...”

“...never was a Malfoy who was any good...”

Neville shut his eyes for a moment. *I need my voice to carry, he willed the Room. I need everyone to hear me, and I need it now.*

“I don't believe what I'm hearing,” he said, using a conversational tone but somehow, by the magic of the Room, clearly audible to all. The murmuring died away. “You want to judge him on what he used to do? On his family? His House? His *blood*? That's how *they* think! Death Eaters! And the last time I checked, we're not them!”

He stared around the room, meeting some people's eyes, watching others look hastily away.

“Draco Malfoy has helped us all year, even when we didn't know it. There are people in this room who owe their lives to him. I'm one of them. That's why I'm going out there to try and do the same for him. The rest of you... do what you like.”

Turning away, he started back down the stairs at a run. Before he had gone more than five steps, there were feet thumping the stair treads behind him, and by the time he reached the hallway door, Neville could hear the entire able population of the Room of Requirement at his back.

*Now let's just hope we're not too late.*

## Be Careful

### 96: What Thoughts You Think

Andromeda rocked her sleeping grandson in her arms and listened to the rapid-fire, six- or seven-way conversation taking place in the next room. Little of it was intelligible to her, since it was being conducted in magical jargon and house-elf as well as the Queen's English, but she could follow the general gist of it.

*I must say I find it amusing that Kreacher and Dobby feel the need to compete for Harry Potter's attention. And it was surprisingly pleasant to see Kreacher happy and content once more. But it is most annoying that Severus Snape has found a way to seal off the school from—not house-elves coming and going, otherwise these two could never have come at Harry's call, but house-elves coming and going with passengers.*

“Kreacher is ashamed that it was his own action that did remind Headmaster Snape of what he was overlooking,” the aged house-elf had said, his hand creeping up to his nose as if to twist it.

“Headmaster Snape, he found out how Kreacher had taken Miss Weasley out of the school to safety, and he placed the new wards on the very next day.”

“It's not your fault, Kreacher,” Harry had reassured the elf. “No punishing yourself. You probably saved Ginny's life that day. We'll find some other way in...”

“But there are still a way in, Harry Potter sir!” Dobby had piped up, his ears twitching with glee. “Dobby knows where it is and Dobby can take Harry Potter and his friends there! With Kreacher's help,” he had added quickly as the older elf looked murderous. “There are too many for one elf to take on one trip and we is needing all the speed we can gets.”

Most of the talk now was down to where and what this way in entailed (Dobby seemed to feel the need to be mysterious about it) and who, exactly, was going with the elves tomorrow. Harry and his three companions from the forest would surely go, Hermione having learned to handle a wand with her left hand well enough to cast a shield while she screamed for help, and Luna had got herself included by whispering a few brief words to Dobby. Andromeda had caught only the barest hint of them, something about reverse psychology and someone winking, but Dobby had been walking on air ever since.

*Perhaps it was some secret the Malfoys forced him to keep, that Draco now has released him from. But what compulsion would survive his freeing? I will ask her if I truly want to know, but for the moment I can live without it. What matters is that Dobby would now take Luna to the moon if she*

*asked to go. Hogsmeade will not present a problem.*

Remus and Nymphadora, for their part, were both arguing well, but Andromeda suspected that even if they purportedly won their arguments and Harry agreed they could come along, he would have a quiet word with the house-elves and her daughter and son-in-law would find themselves left behind.

*He feels, and I agree, that unless it comes to all-out battle their first responsibility is to their son. Andromeda looked down tenderly at the tiny face, recovered from this morning's phase of blue blotches. And if this war were not so terrible, they would feel the same themselves, but when they have both suffered so much already, I cannot fault them too badly for being willing to risk their own lives to end it before it hurts their child as well.*

*Though I can imagine little that would hurt him more than losing one or both parents.*

Briefly, she thought of her nephew, orphaned now in spirit if not in body, and wished she could have given him more than a few words of sympathy about Narcissa and a silent blessing.

*Still, he is safe enough at Hogwarts for the time being. And when the fighting begins, I have no doubt he will find a way to get into the ranks of those with whom he now sympathizes. Andromeda kissed Teddy on the forehead, smiling as the shape of her lips outlined itself in crimson on his skin for a moment before fading. Perhaps, when this war is over, we can find a way to rebuild what is left of the once-noble House of Black.*

*If the war does not claim the rest of our lives in the process of ending it.*

---

“Oh my God!”

“Is he still alive?”

“Turn him over, let him breathe—”

“No, don't touch him, you'll hurt him more!”

The voices came from far away, from behind him in the darkness. He was curious about the speakers, but not curious enough to return and look. The pain was back there, and he couldn't deal with the pain again.

“Merlin's bloody beard, did he do all this by himself?”

“Must have. Unless they missed in the dark.”

“He probably made them miss. Dodged around and let them take each other out.”

“They must have been using Unforgivables. This one's dead.”

Had he killed a person? He hoped not. Some scrap of memory seemed to tell him that killing was a bad thing to do. But the person the voices were talking about had been killed with a wand, and he didn't have a wand. So he couldn't have killed anyone. That was a relief.

Maybe he was the person who had been killed, instead.

“Come on, let's hurry. Get something under him.”

“Don't move too fast. Dropping him would be worse than leaving him here.”

“Better not levitate him, either. Blokes to the fore.”

“Ready, one, two, three, lift—”

Was this being dead, then? This nothingness with just a thread of hearing to link you to life and other people? He'd thought there was more to it than this. The stories had all claimed there was more.

But it wouldn't be the first time stories had lied.

“I still don't believe he did this for them.”

“It seems so unlike him.”

“I guess we never knew as much about him as we thought we did.”

“I guess not. Not if he could be a hero like that.”

He winced away from the wonder and reverence in their voices. “It wasn't being a hero!” he wished he could shout at them. “It wasn't! It was just what had to be done!”

But looking back over what he'd done, he could see clearly how they could mistake it for heroism, even though each step had a perfectly good reason for it. Going to rescue the two little ringleaders? They knew things about him that shouldn't be revealed yet. Giving up the Hand of Glory? It only worked for its owner, and he couldn't very well lead the way, not when they'd be chased. Handing over his wand? He still had to win that duel with his rival, the one who'd beaten him time after time, and the only advantage he could possibly bring to it was to fight with his own weapon, since the other had to borrow his girlfriend's. Taking on the eight pursuers singlehanded, even aided by darkness, a smaller form than they were expecting, and a keen nose that told him where they all were? Well...

There, he had to admit, they might have him. But there had been kids in trouble, kids no older than his own godsiblings and their friends, and he hadn't seen any other way to keep their enemies from getting them.

*Better I die than they do.*

There, he'd thought it straight out. He was dying, or maybe already dead. It was over, and he'd failed the people he cared about the most in a stupid, desperate ploy to save a bunch of babies.

*But if it's stupid and it works...*

*In this case, it's still stupid.*

“Lay him down over here. Careful, don't jostle—”

“Do you think there's anything we can do?”

“I wouldn't even know where to start!”

“All right, everybody out. Crowding around won't help.” This voice had a sound of quiet authority to it. “You wouldn't want people staring at you if you were him. Give him some peace. Let him rest.”

He would have laughed, if he'd had anything to laugh with. *I must be dead. Rest in peace, isn't that what they always put on gravestones? I'm dead, and I just don't know it yet.*

The thought should have inspired fear, or horror, or despair, or *something* besides tired acceptance, but that was all he could find.

*I did my best, and it wasn't good enough. I should have known it wouldn't be. I wasn't born to be a hero.*

*At least I did a few good things with my life.*

*Even if I was right about not living to be eighteen.*

The voice with the quiet authority spoke one word, so softly that he almost missed it.

“*Dormio.*”

Then there was silence.

---

Neville put his wand away and slipped out of the curtained-off alcove the Room of Requirement had created for the battered, bleeding wreck that had been—no, that was Draco Malfoy. The Slytherin wasn't dead yet, though why Neville couldn't be sure. His Housemates had certainly tried their hardest.

*He dodged at least one Killing Curse, if Crabbe's any indication. And some of the others had gashes and broken bones like they were hitting us with near the end. He probably used his mongoose form to confuse them, but he'd have to be human part of the time or risk being stepped on, and then they'd get their hands on him...*

Above his head, cloth rippled, and Neville looked up. He was standing under the three bright banners of the Hogwarts Houses, Gryffindor farthest to the left, Ravenclaw next to it, Hufflepuff on the end. Now the banners were inching over, flapping in the breeze they were creating, the sound clearly audible in the dead silence that had fallen over the Room.

*If this means what I think it does—*

Unfurling from nothing in the way Neville had seen twice before, once when Padma Patil joined her twin in safety, once when Ernie Macmillan ushered in his little group, a green banner emblazoned with Slytherin's silver serpent unrolled beside Hufflepuff's yellow and black. The tiny bunch of Slytherins clustered by themselves near the door stared at it, as did the rest of the Room's inhabitants.

Hannah Abbott broke the hush. "That's much better," she said. "It never seemed right, not to have them all."

And as matter-of-factly as she did everything else, she crossed the no-man's-land between the DA and the Slytherins, and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the face of a first year girl who was trying to blot up her tears with her sleeve.

Neville sat down on his hammock, trying to hide his relief as the rest of the DA awkwardly followed Hannah's lead. He knew he ought to have made some official announcement that the Slytherins were welcome, told the DA he wouldn't stand for them being bullied or pushed around because of what their Housemates had done, but his knees were still feeling weak from the risk he was taking with—

*Call him Reflection. Easier to think of him that way.*

Reflection, then, had let a few things slip in their quiet, shadowy talks. He made jokes about "sleeping on it" and "seeing it in my dreams," the latter being the way he claimed he always knew where Harry was. Once or twice, he said he'd "dreamed up" spells to heal the wounds Neville and his friends still bore from the Carrows' ill-treatment, spells that, when Neville tried them on himself, always worked.

*So it's just possible that sending him to sleep might help him heal himself somehow.*

*And if it doesn't, at least it's a peaceful way to die.*

He pushed his feet off the floor and lay down, staring at the underside of the wooden balcony.

*I don't want to think about ways people die. I don't want to think about healing wounds or hiding from my enemies. I want to think about growing plants, and laughing with my friends, and thinking up ways to make Hannah Abbott like me.*

*But the world doesn't ask you what you want. It just dumps whatever it wants on top of you.*

He closed his eyes, letting the quiet chatter of voices act as a soporific. *Hurry back, Harry, he*

willed. *We've never needed you more.*

## Be Careful 97: Whose Favor You Win

The places a mind would go when it had nothing to occupy its time were very strange ones, Draco thought. His had come up with the fact that lists of famous last words were generally incomplete, in that few to none of them included the word “Ouch.” He considered fixing this, but decided eventually that it was too much trouble to wake up just to say a word.

*Besides, Mum wouldn't see the humor in it. Nor would Abby. Ray and the others... maybe. Depends on how fixated they are on my living to be their hero.*

The thought of living, of his friends and family, set up a wave of desire that seemed stronger than it should be. He'd resigned himself to death, hadn't he? Left it all behind, made up his mind to see if the stories he'd come to believe were true?

He had, but... something, something he couldn't quite remember, had blocked him, stopped him from following through on his resolve. He knew he hadn't expected it, and knew also that he should have. Expected it, that was. But expected or not, remembered or not, it had turned him around and sent him back to the land of the living.

Thus, his need to wake up and say a particular word.

“Ouch.”

“He phoned home!” Whispers were anonymous, sexless, ageless, but the excitement bubbling off this one identified it for Draco anyway. Abigail Beauvoi was the only person he'd ever met who could shriek under her breath.

“Next time you won't doubt me, will you, love?” These words were spoken softly but in a real tone of voice, caressing and chiding all at once, a trick only mothers could do. “Go and see what your mother and father are doing, and tell them the good news.”

“Yes, Aunt Cecy!” A brush of lips against Draco's cheekbone, and the light patter of feet moving rapidly away.

“She hasn't left your side since she and John Black found you here last night,” his mum went on, seating herself. “As I understand it, he felt your need for healing from the Gryffindor common room, and she was able to use that as a focal point to See you here, since his control of his power

is not yet fine enough to locate a person as far away as you were. Once they had found you, they roused half the castle, though I use the term advisedly, since most of us had not yet gone to bed. There were simply too many preparations to make.”

Draco made an interrogative noise, hoping it would serve as the questions he wasn't sure his voice was up to asking yet.

“They are coming, my love.” Mum's hand curled around his, her skin cool and soft to the touch. “The dementors have decided this is their time, and are gathering *en masse* around Hogwarts' wards, sapping them at every point. Even with as many of us as are present here, we cannot hope to hold for much longer than one full day.”

*And I'm flat on my back. Can we say timing?* Draco groaned, surprising himself with the strength of his reaction. *Harry's on his way back in one world, the dementors are trying to finish the job in the other, and I can't bloody well move! Way to be a hero, Malfoy!*

Mum shifted her grasp until her fingertips touched his wrist and her palm pressed against his. “You will forgive my not asking permission,” she murmured. “There is not time for an argument.”

Draco was about to ask what he was supposed to be arguing about when he felt the tickling sensation begin. His hand, his arm, the entire right side of his body tingled, they *itched*, like having a foot wake up after it had gone to sleep, only worse, and now it was spreading to his left side as well, making him shiver all over as though he had a fever.

*It's like being hit by a spell. Like an Ennervate spell. She must be—*

His eyes flew open. He was still in the Room of Requirement, in a proper bed it must have created for him, and his mum sat beside him in a cushioned armchair, her face serene except for the slight crease of effort between her brows. “Almost finished,” she said without opening her own eyes. “Stay still.”

“Not if you're going to do what I think you are.” Draco made to swing his legs out of the bed, but a sharper than usual tingle held them where they were. “Mum!”

“I will be as safe here as anywhere, unless both wards and Patronuses fail.” Her voice was as calm as though she were not discussing the possible loss of her soul to darkness. “You are the indispensable person today, my love, not I. If you require all my strength to finish your tasks properly, then all my strength you shall have.” A smile touched her lips. “Except that which I need to survive, of course. I hardly desire to die, not with the three great ambitions of my life so close to fulfillment.”

“Three?” *Stay still* apparently didn't cover testing his range of motion, as long as he didn't try to stand up. “Do I count?”

“You do. As does the destruction, or at least the hindrance, of the dementors. The third...” Her smile widened. “Who should know better than the one who plans to gratify it?”

“Yeah, there’s something a little weird about matchmaking for my own mum.” Everything worked again, as far as he could tell lying in bed. It was especially nice to breathe freely again. Also, his forehead no longer hurt, which was a relief. He had a distinct recollection of a lull in the beating associated with a sharp pain there, followed by several seconds of shocked whispering.

*That may actually have been when the DA showed up. I don’t remember anything else painful happening after it, except for being lifted up and carried.*

“Parents and children must work these things out among themselves.” Mum’s voice was fainter, though she sounded only tired, not hurt. “You made your decision with little to no help from me, so it seems natural that you should help me to accomplish my goal. Such as it is.” With a sigh, she released his hand. “If he does not care as much for the woman as he did for the dream…”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.” Draco pushed himself carefully upright, bracing against the momentary dizziness, then set his feet on the floor and stood up. “He looked three parts shocked and one part hopeful when he heard what my wand wood was, and the hope’s been overtaking the shock ever since.”

“I like the way that sounds.” She smiled up at him, her eyes drifting open enough to focus on his face for a few moments. “Go well, my son. Remember what you fight for.”

“I will.” He bent and kissed her forehead, feeling a slight electric spark jump between them as his lips touched her. She laughed once and drew the protective sign on the back of his right hand with a forefinger, then leaned her head against one of the wings of the chair and was still.

The door crashed open, and Abby charged in. Draco braced his legs against the bed and opened his arms. She rammed him with less force than he’d expected, probably deferring to the state he’d been in when she’d left, but still transmitted enough of a wallop to make him grunt. “It’s going to be okay,” he told her, unearthing one arm from the hug long enough to stroke her wild hair. “I promise.”

“Mother says don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Abby mumbled into his chest.

“I plan on keeping this one.” He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Just you wait and see.”

“Speaking of seeing,” said Moony, coming in with Danger behind him. “I would suggest you not come out quite yet, Draco. Minerva’s on the warpath regarding an incident involving all of Abigail’s year and the filthiest song in the English language…”

“What?”

Abby lifted her head to give him a look radiating innocence. “You *said* I could Look at the party Luna and her friends had in your world,” she said sweetly. “The songs were funny. Do you know them too, Father?”

“I would imagine I know a few more, having been associated with James and Sirius for longer.

And yes, I would have taught them to you,” Moony added before Abby could ask. “At the proper time.”

“Which twelve years old is not,” Danger said, shaking her head. “Still, there’s no way to get the potion back in the bottle. But was it really necessary to teach them to everyone you know, Abigail?”

“I didn’t want to be selfish.”

Draco sat down on the bed, bringing Abby with him. “Remind me why I want to stay here again?” he said.

“Because we love you and want you to stay?” Danger suggested, joining them and putting her arm around them both.

“Will your love include protecting me from an angry Head of House?”

“If you’re sufficiently brave over the next two days, she’ll probably forget she was angry in favor of saying you should have been a Gryffindor,” Moony pointed out.

“True.”

“And if you’re not, it won’t matter anyway,” said Danger lightly. “Because none of us will be in a position to be angry about anything.”

“Thank you for reminding me.”

Danger squeezed his shoulders with her arm. “Things you can laugh at are less frightening, Draco, and you know it. No one can ever be completely ready for anything, but you have both the knowledge and the abilities you need. All you have to do now is use them.”

“Recipe for erumpent soup,” Draco muttered. “Step one, catch the erumpent.”

“Step one, check your supplies,” corrected Moony. “Which you should do now, and we can help if you don’t mind...”

Checking both his supplies and his plans took an hour, and a meal shared with those of the Beauvois and his friends who could be spared from the preparations for the castle’s defense took another. When the last toast—“Confusion to darkness; the light forever!”—had been drunk, Draco said his goodbyes, exchanging hugs with girls and handshakes and backslaps with boys. Abby waited until both her mother and father had hugged Draco and marked the sign of protection on his forehead before planting herself in front of him, arms crossed.

“You promised,” she said firmly. “Remember you promised.”

“I’ll remember.” Draco pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, gave it to her, and turned away, as much to hide his grin at the tremendous amount of noise her tiny nose could make as to give her

the illusion of privacy. “No, keep it,” he said hastily as she made to return it. “Call it my favor.”

Abby stuck out her tongue at him. “I’m supposed to give that to you, silly.”

“Well?” Draco extended a hand. “Hurry up, wench. I haven’t got all day.”

Frowning, Abby patted her pockets. Then her face cleared, and she drew her wand and pulled a hank of hair over her shoulder. One *snip* later, she laid a brown curl in his palm. “Now I’ll always be able to See you,” she said, beaming. “No matter how many worlds or how many Dracos there are, there’s only one who has a piece of me with him.”

“Minx,” said Draco without heat. “Let me borrow that?” He nodded towards her wand, and she held out the grip to him. Sliding the hair into his other hand, he took the wand and conjured a little red and silver bag for it on the string he was already wearing around his neck. He would hang the soul flask from it as soon as everyone else had left (it would have seriously interfered with the sort of hugs his female friends tended to give). “There,” he said, dropping the hair into its new home and returning the wand to its owner. “My lady’s colors, even.”

“Am I really your lady?” Abby asked, in tones of curiosity rather than intrigue or heartbreak. “I thought it was Luna.”

“You’re my sister-lady.” Draco tickled the side of her neck, making her squeak. “Don’t let Dragon get into too much trouble while I’m gone, now.”

Abby snorted. “Do you want me to make fire stop burning things too?”

“No, that’s Harry’s game, isn’t it?” Draco dodged a sisterly kick to the shin. “Hey, hey, I’ve just been Healed, you know.”

“Good! That means you’re ready to get hurt again!” But the scowl could not hold its shape long on Abby’s face, and after only a moment she flung herself at him. “Oh, Draco,” she whispered into his ear. “Be *careful!*”

“I will.” Draco took a second to memorize the warmth and softness in his arms. He was going to have need of all the happy memories he could get. “Now you go help where you can, and I’ll see you soon.”

Reluctantly, Abby let him go. “You promised,” she repeated.

“I promised.” Draco clasped her hand, then pointed to the door. Abby nodded, gulped once, and ran from the room.

With a sigh, Draco sank back onto the bed, pulling the soul flask from his pocket to slide it into its loop on the string around his neck. *Two worlds on the brink of disaster, my own personal future and countless others in the balance—it’s stupid to think it makes any difference that I promised a little girl it would be all right.*

But beyond a doubt, it did.

*If it's stupid and it works, it isn't stupid. And you're wasting time, Malfoy. Get going.*

He reached for the small flask of potion Neenie had brought him; it had once been Dreamless Sleep, but she had reversed both aspects of it so as to bring on dreams without sleep. Raising it high, he toasted the empty Room, then drank it down.

A moment later, he was gone.

## Be Careful 98: How Much You Tell

Fifteen minutes after the arrival of the Slytherins in the Room of Requirement, quiet had fallen. Everyone below fourth year, and a scattering of those above, was in a hammock and either asleep or pretending to be. The rest of the Room's inhabitants sat by the fireplace, some holding bottles of butterbeer, some their wands, some nothing at all.

Story, recovered from her shock and leaning against the leg of Graham's chair, was the first to break the silence. "They won't let this go," she said.

Several people started, looking around as though the sound of a voice were completely unexpected. Neville turned his head from where he'd been staring into the fire. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Us." Story waved a hand at herself and Graham, then back towards the section of the room which had sprouted hammocks for the younger Slytherins. "We're not only pureblood, we were supposed to be on their side. Our families, some of them, *are* on their side. Others have had to pretend to be. You're all known troublemakers. We're not. They won't let it pass."

"So what do you suggest we do?" Seamus said, shifting his weight.

Graham answered without looking up from Draco's wand, which he was running through his fingers. "I doubt of there being anything we can do," he said quietly. "No owl could get there in time, and none of us can Apparate. Either our families will deny our actions and disown us, or they will fight back and brand themselves traitors. In which case, if they cannot escape in time, they will be killed."

"That's the same risk we've all run," said Terry Boot, uncorking another butterbeer for himself and tossing the cork into the fire. "No worse for you than for the rest of us."

"No, it might be," Susan Bones objected. "Our families knew about us, because they raised us that way. But theirs—" She shot a questioning look at the two Slytherins.

"My parents will have some small warning," said Graham. "Astoria's, likely not, though her sister's continued allegiance may mitigate the severity of the punishment. The rest..." He shrugged. "Most of their families will be as shocked as were all of you."

“That’s if the families find out. How much do you think Snape and the Carrows will want to admit they lost a round dozen prize Slytherins?”

Graham snorted. “I would hardly describe us as ‘prize...’” He trailed off, seeing the stunned expressions on the other faces around the fireplace, and turned to follow their line of sight.

“Evening, all,” continued the voice to which Graham had been responding, and into the firelight strolled Draco Malfoy, alive and to all appearances perfectly healthy. “Wand, please, Pritchard?”

Graham slowly held out the wand. Draco took it, ran it through his own fingers once, and pocketed it. “Thanks for looking after it,” he said, sitting down on an ottoman which hadn’t been there a moment before. “Anyway, prize or not, you’re still Slytherins, the collective apples of their beady little eyes. Some of your parents might even claim that their precious angels could never change sides and the Carrows must’ve made off with you somehow, and don’t think Snape doesn’t know that. He won’t let a word of your disappearing get out for at least twenty-four hours.” He smirked. “And by then, it’ll be too late.”

Just before the silence got ridiculous, Neville shook off his stupor and asked the obvious question. “Too late for what?”

Draco’s smirk grew. “Potter’s on his way back here. He’s got every piece of his puzzle but one, and I know where to find that. I’ll even be nice and do it for him, seeing as we’re on the same side these days. In any case, he’ll be here tomorrow night, and we can finally get this over with.”

“How do you know where Harry is?” Parvati demanded suspiciously.

“Same way I always have.” Draco coughed into his hand once or twice and sat up straighter. “Good evening, *Potterwatch* listeners,” he said in his brisk, cheerful Reflection voice. “Coming to you live from the Hogwarts Room of Requirement, this is Where Harry Potter Is!”

The expressions of the DA members around the fire ranged from astounded to gobsmacked, with a sideline into flabbergasted in the case of Seamus. Neville had to stare into the flames until his eyes watered to keep from laughing in his friends’ faces.

“Tonight, as for the past few weeks, Mr. Potter and his party are staying with former Hogwarts professor Remus Lupin, at the home of Mr. Lupin’s wife’s mother Andromeda Tonks,” Draco continued, his enormous grin creeping into the tones of his voice. “Tomorrow, they plan to journey to Hogsmeade via house-elf, and from there find a way into Hogwarts castle. Will they find what they need there and bring an end to the war at last? Will they survive the epic battles which will surely ensue from their return? Tune in tomorrow to find out, on the final, the climactic episode of *Potterwatch*. This is Reflection, signing off.”

Three seconds of total silence greeted the end of this little peroration. Then everyone tried to talk at once. Draco sat back and looked vaguely interested but uncommunicative. Neville wondered where the Slytherin had learned to do it. His own abilities in that area came from seventeen years of holidays spent with elderly relatives.

When the confused and somewhat profane babble had died down somewhat, Draco pointed at Seamus. “Heard you first, Finnegan. Go ahead.”

“You’ve not been Reflection all this time,” Seamus said, in the tone of someone hoping for a miracle.

“Sorry, but I have been. Ask Longbottom if you don’t believe me.”

Everyone’s eyes swiveled around to Neville. He gave Draco one look which, he hoped, signified that Draco would pay for this at some unspecified but very nearby time in the future, then nodded. “I’ve known since the day Ginny left,” he said.

“And you never told us?” Lavender nearly shrieked.

“Would you have believed me?”

Draco covered his mouth briefly with a hand.

The next hour and a half were full of flying questions and answers, as Draco satisfied the curiosity of most of the DA and told the rest they’d have to wait. Padma Patil was the first to ask about Luna, and the look that came into Draco’s eyes settled any lingering doubts Neville’d had on the subject. If Draco Malfoy had anything to say about it, Luna Lovegood was going to be the happiest girl in the world.

*It’s not what I expected for her, but that’s the cornerstone of Luna’s life, now, isn’t it?*

“...did you get healed so fast?” Michael Corner was asking as Neville started to listen again. “You were three-quarters dead when we brought you in here, and not twenty minutes later you didn’t have a mark on you! I’ve heard of spontaneous self-healing, but that always has secondary effects like fever...”

“Care to feel?” Draco offered his wrist, then pressed it to his own forehead as Michael shrank back and the rest of the DA laughed. “Nope, not a trace of—that’s strange.” The last two words seemed to be more to himself than to the group, as his fingertips stroked along the center of his forehead. “Very strange.” He took his hand away. “You don’t see anything there, do you?”

Shaking heads and variants on “No” from the DA.

“Thought not.” Draco heaved a theatrical sigh. “Way to nearly give me a heart attack, Mum.”

“I thought your mother was dead,” Neville said before he could stop himself.

Draco went very still. “That’s what we wanted people to think,” he said after a moment. “It was the only way to make sure she wouldn’t be followed. No, Mum’s very much alive. She’s just far away, somewhere a lot safer than this. That’s where I went to get healed—she helped with it herself—and Luna and I are headed there for good after we’ve done our bit towards ending the war. So you’d better say your goodbyes when she comes with Potter tomorrow, because you won’t

see her after that.”

This sparked another round of questions, to which Neville only half-listened. His mind was busy chewing over what he had seen out in the hallway where the DA had dragged most of Slytherin House’s seventh years off the remnants of Draco Malfoy, putting it together with his certainty that some part of Draco’s careless speech about his mother had been a lie, and wondering how much of his conclusions to tell to whom.

*I’ll try and get him alone at some point, he decided. Tell him what I saw and let him do the deciding.*

His opportunity came sooner than expected, as Draco glanced at his watch and made a noise of surprise. “Great Merlin, it’s got late. I don’t know about you lot, but I’d prefer a full night’s sleep before I have to fight. Do you have a spare hammock around here somewhere?”

“There’s one for you back near mine and Graham’s,” Story said, speaking for the first time since Draco had reappeared. Her voice was unaccountably hoarse, and a slight gleam showed in her eyes. “It has blankets and a pillow already.”

“Excellent.” Draco stood up briskly. “Good night, all, and if I didn’t say it already, thank you. There are stupid ways to die, and then there are *really stupid ways to die...*”

His spot-on impersonation of Gregory Goyle in one of his less enlightened moments sent everyone to their hammocks laughing. Story lingered a second, as though she wanted to say something to Draco in private, but turned and darted to her hammock before she could speak. Draco watched her go, then looked at Neville, raising a questioning eyebrow. Neville nodded and beckoned Draco nearer, setting a Privacy Spell around them when the Slytherin was close enough.

“Yes?” Draco said nonchalantly, lounging against the wall beside the fireplace.

Neville thought of a few ways to start, such as “I don’t know how to tell you this, but...” and discarded them all. “Your forehead was cut when we found you out there,” he said finally. “Lightning-bolt shape, like Harry’s. Crabbe was dead on the floor beside you.”

“Killing Curse?”

“It looked like. He didn’t have any marks on him, he was just dead. But you didn’t have a wand, and you weren’t in any shape to dodge.”

“I see what you’re getting at.” Draco turned away for a moment, murmuring a few words in what sounded like Latin, then faced Neville again, his face as calm as ever. “It’s a very, very long story,” he said. “There’s no time for it tonight, but you’re already on the list of the people who’re slated to hear it. So you will know eventually. I just can’t tell you now.”

“Fair enough. Does it have something to do with how you always knew where Harry was?”

“It does.”

“And why you suddenly changed your mind about what side was the right one to be on?”

Draco laughed once, a sound with little real humor in it. “That was more a process of wanting to stay alive than anything else. But yes, it’s to do with that too.”

Neville nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “For everything you’ve done for us, this past year.”

“Don’t mention it.” Draco looked at the floor. “Really, I mean that. Don’t. When I think what an arse I was all those years, especially to you…”

“You’ve made up for it and then some. If there’s anything I can do for you—”

“You mean besides saving my life?”

“You saved mine. It’s only fair.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Draco’s head came up suddenly. “But there is something—my God, I can’t believe I almost forgot—tomorrow morning, can you take everyone to breakfast? I mean, absolutely everyone else, clear out the Room except for me, but don’t make a fuss about it?”

“I can,” Neville said slowly. “Do you mind if I ask why?”

“Because.” Draco chuckled deep in his throat. “That thing Harry needs? It’s in another version of this Room.”

## **Be Careful**

### **99: How You Accept Help**

Harry's little company had planned to leave for Hogwarts around noon, but in the usual way of departures, one thing after another had delayed them, and it was nearly dark before they finally gathered around the two house-elves in Andromeda's living room. Lupin and Tonks had agreed to remain behind only after Harry's promise that he'd call them in case of emergency.

*But there won't be any emergency.* Harry fingered the Invisibility Cloak where it hung over his arm. *We'll find the last Horcrux and get rid of it, and then I'll find Voldemort and get rid of him. Somehow. Go off somewhere and call his name, maybe, and from there take whatever chance offers.*

"Hey," Ginny whispered, poking him in the arm. "Don't look like that. It's going to be okay."

"Yeah." Harry tried to smile. "Because you said so, right?"

"Yes. Because I said so." Ginny puffed out her chest and stuck her nose in the air, and Harry managed a real smile.

"Let's do this," he said, holding his hand down to Kreacher. "Everybody in."

Ron steadied Hermione as she took Dobby's hand. Ginny settled Gryffindor's sword more firmly across her back, and Luna took the Cloak from Harry's arm and draped it over him and Kreacher, then turned and knelt to grip Dobby's shoulder.

"Best of luck," said Lupin, one arm around Tonks and the other holding Teddy. "You know where to find us if you need anything."

"And if you don't, we might turn up anyway," Tonks added.

Andromeda said nothing, but Harry saw her hand moving, and recognized a wandless charm of protection he'd seen her lay on Teddy a few times. A warm glow filled him, and stayed with him even through the sudden darkness of Apparition.

Whatever happened next, he wasn't in this alone.

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The DA had just left the Hog's Head after dinner when a loud triple bang sounded from the far end of the bar. Aberforth Dumbledore pulled his wand, motioned the portrait figure of Ariana to stay out of the frame, and started towards the noise. "We're closed," he snapped at the shapeless mass in the darkness. "Unless you want rooms."

"It's not rooms we need," said a girl's voice, and one portion of the mass detached itself to come forward into the light. "It's information."

"About wha—" Aberforth stopped, looking the girl up and down. "You were out back of here, about a week and a half ago," he said. "With a boy."

"Oh, did you hear us?" The girl sighed. "I'd thought we were alone. But it doesn't matter now." She waved a hand at the blobby shapes behind her, now visibly three human forms. "We asked some house-elf friends to bring us to Hogwarts, but they couldn't get us all the way into the castle, so they brought us here, and now they've gone again. I think that means you have a way in. Do you?"

"Depends." Aberforth squinted at the figures. "Who's with you?"

With a light swish of fabric, a fourth figure materialized. "If you're looking for me, here I am," said Harry Potter, stepping into the light behind the girl. "Can you?"

Aberforth crossed his arms, hiding his flash of pain. *Your damn idealism again, Albus, living on after you, dragging these kids down with you...* "And if I can?"

"If you can, then we need it," Potter said. "We think we know how to get rid of... You-Know-Who. We could even do it tonight."

"Nice work if you can get it." Turning, Aberforth beckoned the kids to follow him with a peremptory hand. "Have a seat."

*And maybe I can convince you to save your own lives while there's still time.*

---

Neville wasn't sure he believed his ears.

*But considering the source, yes, I do.*

"Say that one more time, and use little words," he said. "You want me to..."

"Go behind Potter's back and get us some help." Draco wiggled his fingers suggestively. "He's got his hero complex going full speed at this point. Doesn't want anybody else to die, or even to be in danger, if he can help it. What he doesn't get yet is that he *can't* help it, not if he wants to win."

"Why not?"

“You-Know-Who’s a very practical sort.” Grey eyes flicked up to the Slytherin banner and down again. “Which is another way of saying, a bloody coward. Why do you think he went after a baby, and then after a fourteen-year-old kid? He doesn’t want a fair fight. He wants Potter dead. And I don’t care how heroic Potter is, he can’t do anything wandless and tied up, which is the only way the Death Eaters are going to let him near their beloved Master.” The last two words contained enough sarcasm to flavor a small book. “Unless somebody forces the issue.”

“And to force the issue, we need enough people to fight the Death Eaters.” Neville nodded. “All right. If you can keep him busy, we can get the message out.”

“Not a problem.” Draco cracked his knuckles, grinning. “All I have to do is kiss Luna and we’re good for five minutes at least.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to get over that,” Neville muttered.

Draco waved an airy hand. “Just consider it a new facet of her flair for the unusual.”

“I was thinking more ‘unexplored tendencies towards masochism.’”

“Hey!”

“Ariana!” squealed Dennis Creevey from the other side of the room, bringing Neville’s and Draco’s heads around instantly. “Look, everyone, Ariana’s back! She wants somebody to come with her!”

“That’s it,” Draco murmured. “It’s time.” He held out his hand to Neville. “Good luck.”

“You too.” Neville shook it, taking one more second to marvel at the unlikeliness of this moment. “Have what you needed?”

“Right here.” A flap of black cloth was lifted to display a glimmer of silver. Neville caught a glimpse of what looked like a book behind it, and a wand handle next to it.

*But he carries his wand in a different pocket, I saw him put it away...*

Mentally shaking off the distraction, he nodded to Draco and crossed the room to the passage behind Ariana’s portrait. His hand closed around the DA Galleon in his pocket, his fingers tapping against it as he counted letters for the message he would so soon be sending.

*Come to Hogwarts. Bring your wands. Harry’s back.*

---

Draco slipped into a back corner, sliding his hand along the wall in a move he hoped looked casual enough to disguise that he was leaning on it for support. Now that the moment was almost here, his knees had begun to shake so hard he could barely stand up.

*Calm, Malfoy. Breathe. Go over it again.* He reviewed the steps of his plan, touching the items in

his pocket as they came up. *Show what I have, give my ultimatum, hand over one piece of collateral for goodwill...*

A scrape of shoe against floor warned him just barely in time as a tentative voice said, “Draco?”

“Astoria,” he acknowledged, turning to look at the younger girl.

She flinched. “Don’t. Please. I hate that name.”

“Story, then.” Draco patted the wall, and two chairs bulged out of it and took on independent existence. “Sit down?”

“Thank you.” Story perched on the edge of her chair, watching him closely. “You’re going away.”

“Not right now, but yes, I am.”

“With Luna Lovegood.”

“That’s certainly the plan.” *And with somebody else as well...*

At the thought of that somebody else, Draco’s hand stole to the soul flask around his neck, and the realization of what he’d forgot to do shocked through him. *Merlin’s bones, I never got this thing charged! I have to call Dobby—*

“What’s wrong?” Story asked.

“Nothing. Just remembered a chore I’ve got to do. But it can wait.”

*I hope.*

Pulling the flask out of his robes, to be sure he would remember, Draco turned his attention back to his Housemate. “Something you wanted to say?”

“I—no.” Story turned away. “No. Nothing.”

“I swear I won’t laugh.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing.” Draco put together what he knew about girls with the particular circumstance Story had mentioned and came up with a tentative conclusion. “You’ve been a good friend to me,” he said. “Thank you for that.”

“A good friend,” Story repeated dully. “Only a good friend.”

“There’s no ‘only’ about it. Friends are important. Doubly so in Slytherin, where you don’t get a lot of good ones.” Draco rubbed his forehead again, trying to decide whether or not he was

imagining the jagged scar there. “Trust me. I know.”

“I wanted...” Her voice was barely audible. “More.”

“I know. And—” He stopped before he could utter the easy, conventional assurance. “No,” he said instead. “I don’t wish I could have given it to you, because it wouldn’t be right for either of us now. If things were different, if I didn’t have Luna and you didn’t have Pritchard—”

“What?” Story whipped around. “What does Graham have to do with anything?”

“You haven’t seen the way he looks at you?” Draco smiled, finding some reassurance in her shocked yet calculating expression. *Ah, Slytherin girls. Pritchard, you poor sod, you don’t stand a chance, and I’m not a bit sorry for it.*

“I thought it was just because I was Natalie’s friend.” Story’s eyes were distant, looking into memories and reviewing tones, glances, word choices. “I never thought...”

“It was taking everything Goyle could do to hold him back when I broke in yesterday, and considering the size difference, that’s saying something. Just don’t let him know you know, and you should be all right.”

She bestowed a withering look on him. “I’m not *stupid* .”

“Never said you were.” Draco stood up, his chair melting back into the wall. “It’s been a pleasure knowing you,” he said, holding out his hand. “If you want to do something to remember me by, try and haul our House’s reputation out of the gutter.”

“I’d do that in any case.” Story met his hand with her own. “Is there anything else?”

“There is. And it’s as much a present to you two as it will be to me.” Draco grinned. “Give your children normal names.”

Story laughed, and squeezed his hand once before letting it go. “I will. I promise.”

“Thank you, Miss Greengrass, you relieve my mind most heartily.” Draco gave her his most polished ballroom bow. “I wish you all the very best.”

“And I you, Mister Malfoy.” Story curtsied prettily, then glanced around. Before Draco realized what she was doing, she had gone on tiptoe and planted a kiss square on his mouth.

“Don’t say I never gave you anything,” she said, and took off running.

*Well.* Draco leaned back against the wall, rubbing a finger against his lips. *Maybe I’m a bit sorry for Pritchard now.*

*But only a bit.*

Across the room, Ariana's portrait swung open.

---

"Where are we?" Hermione asked when the first frenzies of greeting were over, looking around in wonder.

"Room of Requirement!" Neville grinned at her. "Really gone beyond itself, hasn't it? There's even enough room for pick-up Quidditch if the players fly carefully, we use the bathroom and the entry door for goals, but enough about us, what about you? Where've you been? That bit about you on *Potterwatch* stopped before we got here—"

"As if you didn't know why," muttered a short, dark boy behind him whom Harry didn't recognize. Neville's shoulder was blocking his House crest, but that might change at any moment...

"What's *that* doing here?" Ron asked loudly, pointing. Everyone turned to look.

There, undulating gently in the breeze produced by the movement below, hung the banners of the four Houses. Ron's finger was aimed directly at the green and silver on the far right.

"It's here because it deserves to be," said a female voice, and the crowd of students parted to let through a blond girl with a determined look and a Slytherin patch over her heart. "You ought to know that, considering who you're with."

"Who I'm—" Ron turned to follow the girl's look and caught sight of Luna. To Harry's surprise, his friend colored up and muttered what sounded like an apology, to which Luna responded with a polite nod.

*Never mind. Figure it out later.* "We can't stay long," Harry said, getting everyone's attention again. "We're here to find something important, something that will help bring down You-Know-Who..."

He stopped, confused, as giggling and whispering broke out in several places near the back of the crowd. *Was it something I said?*

"Don't bother telling them that," drawled a familiar voice from his left. "I told them already."

Ginny inhaled sharply, Hermione emitted a slight squeak, Ron hissed between his teeth, and Luna let out a soft hum of pleasure as the speaker stepped forward into the light.

In the last place on Earth Harry Potter would have expected him to be, Draco Malfoy stood at his ease, hands thrust into his pockets and an insouciant smile on his face.

Only one thought could make it through Harry's frozen disbelief.

*Somebody has a lot of explaining to do.*

## Be Careful 100: What Tales You Tell

Keeping his right shoulder to the fore and showing off his best fashionable slouch, Draco advanced on the little company who'd just come in from the Hog's Head. To Harry's credit, he wasn't backing away, though his face showed all the distaste and confusion Draco had been expecting.

*First point to me. Now to keep it moving quickly enough we don't fall through the cracks.*

Draco glanced sideways at Neville, who nodded in confirmation and laid a hand on the wood paneling of the Room. Hermione squeaked and Ginny stared as a stone wall sprang up behind Draco, cutting him and the other five off from the DA. Draco leaned back against the wall, propping one heel on the other foot's toes. "Fancy meeting you here," he drawled. "Have a good trip?"

"What's your game, Malfoy?" Harry asked, his voice tight with anger.

"Same as yours. Surviving this bloody war." Draco swung his foot idly back and forth. "And giving my side of it all the help I can, within reason."

"Which doesn't explain what you're doing here, since we're on opposite sides."

"Opposite sides? Really?" A reasonable facsimile of the expression Abby had used when he'd caught her raiding his chocolate stash a few weeks ago served Draco well here. "Oh, that's right, you won't have heard. See, I changed my mind over the summer. Decided I liked your side better."

Harry folded his arms and gave Draco the flattest stare he'd ever encountered, even from Snape. "Pull the other one."

"No, it's true." Draco started to sit down on the floor, but stopped halfway due to the sudden sprouting of a chair. "Thank you," he said to the wall, then returned his attention to Harry. "I never did a lot of thinking about what side to be on, you know. Got born to one and stayed there. But sometime last July, it dawned on me that one of the sides in this thing had a bit more tolerance for amusing personal foibles like not wanting to kill a man just because I'm told to. Or not wanting to kill anybody at all, for that matter. It just happened, by bad luck, to be the side I wasn't on at the moment. So I had to change."

“And you just did it.” Harry snapped his fingers. “Like that.”

“Not exactly like that. There was work involved.” Draco grimaced, remembering some of the times he’d lost his temper or his manners. “As much as I adore work. But I had some help, and it didn’t take me long to work out I could do things no one else could. Since I didn’t bother to put up signs or hang out flags to let everyone know I’d swapped sides, all my parents saw—and all their Master saw—was that stupid Malfoy brat finally making something of himself, being useful for a change. They wanted to encourage it. So I had pretty well a free rein.” He grinned, letting his eyes flick back to Luna for an instant and feeling a surge of warmth in his chest from the happiness in her face. “I learned all kinds of interesting things.”

“For instance,” Harry prompted, starting to look as if, somewhat against his will, he wanted to hear more.

“For instance? Oh…” Draco leaned back in his chair and reached into his pocket, drawing out the diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw. “Horcruxes.”

The word rocked Harry and Ron both visibly back. Hermione covered her mouth. Ginny sighed and shook her head. Luna had a fist to her lips to stifle giggles. Draco winked at her and twirled the diadem on one finger. “Pretty, isn’t it?” he said, pretending to admire the way the tarnished silver caught the light.

Harry recovered his breath enough to speak. “How do you know that word?” he demanded.

“Mostly from you,” Draco admitted, dropping the diadem into his lap. “You talked about it enough, out in that tent of yours.”

“You spied on us?” blurted Ron.

Draco shrugged. “Everybody needs a hobby.”

Ginny burst out laughing. Hermione looked as if she’d like to, but didn’t quite dare. “That’s how you knew where we’d been,” she said. “So that you could tell people on *Potterwatch*, to stop them worrying.”

“*Potterwatch*?” Harry yelped. There was no other word for the tone of voice he’d used, and Draco wished he’d remembered to bring his camera.

*I’ve been trying to get him to look like that for the last seven years.*

“Reflection was *you*?” finished Harry. He seemed to be unsure whether he wanted it confirmed or denied.

Draco cleared his throat. “Coming to you live from the Room of Requirement, this is Where Harry Potter Is!” he proclaimed in his Reflection voice. “He’s here safe and sound, home again at Hogwarts and glad he made it!”

“But Reflection was...” Harry trailed off and turned, as did the rest of the group, to look at Luna, who gave them all a cheerful smile.

“In case you needed any more proof,” Draco said into the silence. “Do you really think she’d agree to marry a Dark wizard?”

Ginny looked over her shoulder at him. “This is the daughter of the editor of *The Quibbler* we’re talking about,” she said. “I wouldn’t put anything past her. Besides, you might always have turned her.”

Draco snorted. “When was the last time you saw anyone convince Luna of something she didn’t want to be convinced of?”

“Er...”

“That’s what I thought. Besides, if she’d gone Dark, why didn’t she just run off to her Master that first night you were together and let him know where you were before the Fidelius went up?”

Draco tossed the diadem into the air and caught it again. “Evil is all about instant gratification. Trust me on this.”

“Trust you,” Harry said hollowly. “Har, har. Very funny.”

“You’ve been doing it without knowing for the past year,” Draco pointed out. “I’ve been able to see you since the day you headed into the woods.”

“Prove it.”

“Ask him.” Draco hooked a thumb at Ron. “Or hasn’t he told you who was there waiting for him when he walked out?”

Ron gave a reluctant nod.

“She knows it too.” Under cover of pretending to toss the diadem to Hermione, Draco nodded to her. *I didn’t forget about you. We’re coming to that bit.* “I stopped her in Hogsmeade to ask a favor.”

Harry turned and gave Hermione a look usually reserved for horklumps and similar specimens. “Is that why you were delayed that day?” he asked venomously. “Hanging around with the enemy?”

“He’s not the enemy anymore, Harry!” Hermione snapped back. “Haven’t you been listening? He’s helped us all year! Who do you think Luna’s friend was, the one who made sure she wasn’t hurt among the Death Eaters, the one who sent us that box with the cup and the fang? Why do you think Snape never bothered to go looking for Ginny after she disappeared? And just in case you need something else to get it through your thick skull, let’s not forget I owe him my *life!* ”

*What was that word Ray taught me the other day? Ah, yes.* Draco drew an invisible tally mark in the air with his forefinger. *Potter, you poor sod, you’ve just been owned.*

Harry swung back around to face Draco, his face mulish. “So you’ve been helping us along,” he said. “How do I know you won’t suddenly decide you’d rather go back to your Dark Lord and press your Mark to let him know we’re here?”

*Oh, this is going to be good.* “Press my Mark,” Draco repeated, tucking the diadem back into his pocket and standing up. “That might cause me some difficulty. You see...”

His hand went to the catch of his robes. Instantly, Harry’s wand was out and trained on him.

Draco sighed. “Yes, Potter, it’s true,” he said in a long-suffering tone. “I really am so sexy I could kill you just by taking off my robes.”

Ginny snorted laughter into her hand. Ron and Luna didn’t bother covering it up. Hermione smiled and touched Harry’s arm. “It’s all right, Harry,” she said quietly. “He won’t hurt us.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Hermione glanced at Draco, then back at Harry. “Trust me.”

Reluctantly, Harry lowered his wand.

Draco snapped open his robes and let them drop from his shoulders. The jeans and short-sleeved shirt he was wearing underneath (with some malice aforethought, he had chosen a tee printed with a picture depicting lion, eagle, and badger all sleeping on the coils of a basilisk-sized snake) did nothing to conceal the fact that he’d removed his prosthesis before coming out to meet the travelers.

*Because nothing says “Welcome home” like a one-armed man.*

“Hard to press what I don’t have,” he said, turning to display the place where his left forearm wasn’t.

“When did that happen?” Harry asked, his voice losing its suspicious edge for the first time.

“Christmas Eve. Closest call I’ve had so far. Oh, and Weasley, just by the way...” Draco glared at the taller boy. “The next time you kill something, would you mind making sure it’s actually dead?”

Ron blinked several times. “The snake did that to you?”

“No, he did it to himself,” said Luna, bringing everyone’s heads around a hundred and eighty degrees to focus on her. “He used Fiendfyre, because the snake was biting him there and the venom would have killed him. Like Hermione.”

“So that’s how you knew what to do,” Ron said, nodding.

“Christmas Eve.” Harry’s gaze was distant, looking into the past. “I saw through his eyes. A boy

and a girl, disappearing in flames. He thought it was me and Hermione.”

“No such luck for him.” Draco rolled his shoulders. “Though I doubt anyone would have been happy if he’d caught me and Luna instead. Especially after we’d just got done taking out one of his precious Horcruxes. Speaking of which...” He drew the diadem back out of his pocket and held it up. “I believe this is what you’re here for.”

“I’ve seen that somewhere before,” said Harry, frowning at the diadem. “I just can’t remember where...”

Draco let the diadem slide down his arm, bracelet-style, and pulled out the Half-Blood Prince’s annotated Potions text. “Marking the spot where you left this, perchance?” A flick of his wrist sent the book spinning across the room to Harry. “Some good stuff in there. Just don’t try any more of those spells on living targets when you don’t know what they do, all right?”

Harry made an obscene gesture in Draco’s direction.

“I’m missing something,” said Hermione.

“Oh, you mean he hasn’t told you about this one?” Draco grinned. “Well, it all started in the sixth floor boys’ toilet...”

“Save it,” Harry snapped. “Are you going to wear that thing on your arm all day, Malfoy, or do you have other plans for it?”

“What, this?” Draco shrugged the diadem back into his hand. “I suppose I could just give it to you, but that’s so boring. No, I have a better idea. Let’s duel for it.”

“Duel for it?”

“You know, back to back, five paces away, turn, bow, cast, last one holding a wand wins? No snakes this time, I promise,” Draco added. “You’d just talk it into biting me anyway.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Give me a minute to think about it,” he said.

“No rush. Take your time.” Draco set the diadem on his chair and leaned back against the wall as Hermione and both Weasleys closed in on Harry and began to talk at once. Over the curve of Ginny’s back, he beckoned to Luna.

She came eagerly, sliding her arms around him and rubbing her cheek against his chin. “I was so worried when I saw you were hurt,” she whispered. “But Neville did the right thing for you. I don’t know how to thank him enough.”

“That makes two of us.” Draco eased her to one side as the soul flask caught between them, then sucked in a breath, remembering. “Luna, I need your help. Can you run out to my hammock—anybody can tell you which one it is—and get what I left there? And on the way, can you call Dobby and have him power this up?” He pulled the cord of the flask off his own neck and hung it

around hers. “Mum’d never forgive me if I forgot that.”

“Good thing I hugged you, isn’t it?” Luna giggled once, kissed his cheek, and slipped out a door in the wall which hadn’t been there a moment before and wasn’t there a moment after.

“Yes,” Draco answered her anyway, watching the place where she had vanished. “It’s been a very good thing for me.”

*Now as long as I can win this duel, everything should go just fine.*

The huddle across the room broke up. “Would you Vow to fight fair if I asked you to, Malfoy?” Harry said, coming to the center of the room.

Draco throttled back his momentary offense at the question. *With the way I’ve treated him in the past, he’s got every right to ask.* “Yes.”

“Then I don’t have to ask.” Harry held out his hand. “I’ll duel you. Fairly.”

“As I will you.” Draco met the hand with his own. They shook once, firmly, and let go.

“Who’s going to hold it?” Ginny asked. “None of us are exactly neutral here.”

“True, but one comes closer than most.” Scooping up the diadem from his seat, Draco turned and held it out to Hermione. “Will you?” he asked.

“Will you destroy it if you win?” she countered.

“Yes.”

“Then I will.”

The diadem passed from right hand to left.

“Why bother dueling if you’re both going to kill it?” asked Ron.

Draco shrugged. “Call it a grudge match. I’m leaving for good after we get this war thing settled, and Potter always seems to win whenever we duel, so I want to see if I can’t beat him at least once before I go.”

“Fair enough. What’re we waiting for?”

“For Luna,” said Ginny, shifting the sword of Gryffindor in its scabbard across her back. “She deserves to see it.”

“Where’d she go?” Harry asked, looking around.

“Here I am,” Luna answered for herself, shutting the door behind her and holding up the object she

was carrying. "I thought Draco might need a hand."

Draco turned around and thumped his forehead against the wall.

*Just in case I still had any shreds of dignity left...*

## **Be Careful**

### **101: How You Win Or Lose**

Flexing the fingers of his left hand, Draco noted absently that the action seemed to horrify Harry, and wondered if this could be how he was supposed to win the duel.

*The psych-out effect. Awesome, if true.*

As if he didn't realize what he was doing, he made a loose fist and stretched his thumb, then tucked it in and extended his index finger.

“We get it, your hand works,” Harry snapped. “Quit messing around and let's duel.”

Draco allowed the next finger in line to pop up in answer. Harry glared. Ron and Ginny both had to turn around. Luna watched everyone with her head tilted to one side, running her finger down the side of the soul flask, which she was now wearing around her own neck.

Hermione sighed, kicking Ron in the ankle. “That's enough,” she said, ostensibly to him but directing a sharp glance at both Harry and Draco as she spoke. “We need to get on with things. Duelers to the center.”

*Here goes nothing.* Draco stepped forward and saluted Harry, wand held upright in front of his face. Harry returned the courtesy stiffly but not grudgingly.

“Turn,” Hermione ordered.

Both of them pivoted on a foot and stood back to back.

“Five paces.”

The wall of their miniature Room stretched to accommodate them.

“Wands at the ready.”

*I have to win. I have to win.* Draco licked his lips and readied a Stunner.

“Three! Two! One!”

Draco whirled, bringing his wand around, only to hear Harry shouting “*Expelliarmus !*” before

Draco could even see his opponent.

*How did he—*

The spell slammed into his shoulder and sent him sailing backwards to crash into a wall which must have developed padding at lightning speed. His neck was kinked painfully from the impact, and he suspected his left shoulder would have a bruise of great splendor adorning it tomorrow. His right hand, when he got it up to look at it, was covered with red patches of brushburn from the force with which his wand had been torn away.

*And none of that would matter if I'd just won like I was supposed to. But I didn't, I lost again, and now everything's going to go wrong and it's all my fault...*

"You did it," a voice breathed into his ear, and Luna's gray robes cut off his vision of the rest of the world. "You were perfect, you did it just like you were supposed to."

"Perfect?" Draco accepted Luna's hand and hauled himself into a sitting position. "Luna, I was supposed to—"

"Lose," Luna cut him off. "You were supposed to lose, but you couldn't know that because then you wouldn't try, and you had to try. You had to try and you had to lose, and that's exactly what you did." She beamed at him. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"I can think of a few other words for it," Draco said slowly. "Was it really necessary?"

"Yes, it really was." Luna took off the soul flask and hung it around Draco's neck, lowering herself down in the process to whisper in his ear.

After a moment, Draco nodded. The story was fragmentary, and he'd want it expanded later, but he thought he understood enough now to go on with.

*Also later will be the obligatory moaning and groaning over being the Master of the world's most notorious wand for nearly a year and never getting a chance to use the thing. But for now, I have work to do. And it starts by saying...*

"Ow." Draco leaned his head carefully back and to the left, wincing. "Good thing we did this in the Room of Requirement. A real stone wall'd have broken my neck at that angle. As it is..." He got his feet under him and stood up, rolling his shoulders back. "Be stiff tomorrow, but no harm done." A smile sneaked onto his face unbidden as he looked down the room at Harry, who seemed almost surprised to find himself holding two wands. "Good shot, Potter. I knew you were fast, but I didn't know you were that fast."

"I've been practicing." Harry held out the hawthorn wand. "This is yours."

Draco shook his head. "Not anymore. You took it away from me when I didn't want you to. That makes it yours. You can give the Weaslette hers back now, she may need it tonight."

“I’m underage,” Ginny said automatically, but she took the wand Harry extended to her. “What do you mean, tonight?”

“Are we getting rid of that or not?” Draco pointed at the diadem Horcrux, which Hermione had now laid down in the center of the stone floor. “Because if we are, and it’s the last one like you think, then a certain person is vulnerable for the first time in quite a while. I can’t be the only one who wants this damn war over with. Why not tonight?”

For answer, Harry drew Gryffindor’s sword from its sheath on Ginny’s back and held it out to Hermione, who grasped its handle awkwardly. “That’s right, it’s my turn,” she said, mustering a smile. “I’d almost forgot.”

“Kill it before it talks,” Ron urged her. “Two is enough.”

“Right.” Hermione took two steps forward, screamed like a banshee, and brought the sword down across the diadem with a clang and a shower of sparks where silver clashed against stone. The diadem, too, screamed, a thin and twisted sound, which was cut off short as Hermione struck again and the tarnished circlet snapped in half.

Ron whooped and punched the air, Ginny and Luna applauded, and Harry grinned at Hermione. She returned the expression, shakily, and pressed the sword into Ron’s hands when he closed the distance between them. “Can you put it back?” she asked. “I don’t know if I can, with—”

“Course I will.” Ron kissed her forehead. “You were amazing, Hermione.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s only the truth,” Draco said, shooting a look at Luna. She nodded and turned towards Harry and Ginny, beginning a high-speed conversation about how her father had a theory about the places that You-Know-Who might like to hide. Ron, returning the sword to its place, joined in, and Draco sent a silent request to the Room, which materialized an invisible barrier between the two groups.

“Sometimes the truth is frightening.” Hermione sat down on nothing, which became a chair halfway down. “Like the truth about you and me. Are we really—”

“We are.” Draco did the same across from her. “I take it they don’t know.”

Hermione laughed. “You saw how well Harry took everything else about you. He didn’t need to know this. Nor did Ron or Ginny.” Her face grew thoughtful. “They may never need to know. I don’t see why they should. Do you?”

“Now that I think about it, no.” Draco hitched his chair a bit closer to Hermione’s. “It would bother them unduly, and especially tonight they don’t need distraction. Maybe someday you’ll let it slip, but for now it’s our little secret.” He opened his left hand and laid it, palm up, on her knee. “Let’s get started.”

*Our little secret. Yes, that's one way to describe the knowledge that Hermione Granger is no longer a Muggle-born. That the Malfoys are only going extinct in the male line, instead of plain old extinct, when I make that final jump. That, in short, I made that mad story I told come true.*

It had seemed logical to him. The ferecarne from which his prosthetic arm was made had molded itself to his body, which was why it responded so well to him. If Hermione's body had more in common with his own, the ferecarne should react better to her.

*So I proposed a blood-bonding to her, and after the first "Eurgh that's disgusting" reaction, she took it surprisingly calmly. Probably because if there was one thing I could do to prove to her I wasn't putting this on for her benefit, it was offer to adulterate my precious pure blood with her "muddiness." We made the exchange, let it settle in, and now...*

Hermione laid her right wrist in Draco's palm. "Ready when you are," she said.

Draco closed his fingers around the wrist, shut his eyes, and began the set of thought-commands his mum had helped him work out for this moment. *Let go of me*, he mentally directed the lower half of his prosthesis, feeling it disconnecting from the upper half in response to his thought. *You belong to my sister now. Be what she needs. Serve her as well as you serve me; do her bidding in all things; give her back what she lost at my hands. Go to her, and go to her now. So let it be done.*

A muffled gasp from Hermione brought Draco's eyes open. He looked away hastily from the writhing flesh on her lap. "Don't fight it," he said, working towards a persuasive tone, equal parts coaxing and commanding. "You want this, you need it. Let it happen. I know it feels strange at first but it'll be over soon and you'll be happy about it, you'll see..." He stopped, frowning. "Is it just me, or does that sound like I'm doing something to you that'd make Weasley want to hex my balls to the moon?"

"It does, a bit." Hermione actually giggled, though the sound was strained. "I'm glad he can't hear it. Do you think he's noticed we're gone yet?"

"Not if Luna's doing her job. Which I'm sure she is." Draco nodded in satisfaction as the ferecarne swarming around Hermione's wrist settled into a shape. "There we are. Does that feel like you remember?"

"It—what—" Hermione stared at her right hand, then tentatively lifted it to her face and touched her forehead, her lips, her chin. The fingers tangled in her hair, then dropped to the shoulder of her robes. "It does. It truly does. It's my hand, my wand hand, I have it back again—"

"Speaking of which," Draco interrupted before the tears he could see threatening had a chance to emerge. "A proper wand hand deserves a proper wand." He dipped into his inside pocket and pulled out the one piece of salvage he'd brought away from Malfoy Manor with him. "I believe this belongs to you."

*Add to the list of things I never thought I'd see but I'm glad I did: Hermione Granger literally speechless with joy.*

“If I were you, I wouldn’t say anything to them at all,” Draco said, bringing Hermione partway out of her reverie over her restored wand and hand. “We’ll just go out there and see how long it takes them to notice.”

“But your poor arm...” Hermione gestured vaguely to the remains of Draco’s prosthetic. “Won’t they see it?”

“They didn’t notice when it wasn’t there at all, I’m betting they won’t when it’s only half there. Besides...” Draco looked down at the stump and trained his will on it, grinning as it turned the angry red he wanted. “I’ve got a plan for this.”

*So to speak when it’s really Dumbledore’s portrait who had the plan, and Luna who told it to me. It sounds like the maddest thing I’ve ever heard of, but so would this whole year if I hadn’t lived it. Besides, a little madness is a small price to pay for Mum’s happiness.*

He grinned to himself. *Not to mention, Mum gave Luna something that means I can fool His Dark Evilness himself, and screw with dear Headmaster Snape’s head but good. This is going to be fun.*

“Do you want me to tie that up?” Hermione asked, pointing to his stump.

Draco blinked. “How’d you know?”

“You have to be making it look like you’re hurt for a reason, and it isn’t for us, because we know you’re not. So you’ll want it covered until you get to the people you do want to think that it’s hurt, and having it bandaged would help even more to make them think that.” Hermione waved her wand in three careful curves and conjured a clean white bandage around the stump, talking all the while. “It’ll also hide that you don’t have the Mark anymore. How did you do it while you were here at school? Keep your sleeves down all the time, like Snape always did?”

“Mostly.” Draco pulled the bandage tighter. “But just in case, I had it on there anyway, but hidden. It was heat-activated.”

“Heat?” Hermione knotted her brows for a moment, then laughed. “So you could put your other hand on it like it hurt, and then it would show up!”

Draco bowed slightly. “You have it exactly. Now, shall we rejoin the others and get ready for the great big nasty battle we’re going to have tonight?”

“That sounds lovely.” Hermione sketched a smiley face in the air with lines of light. “But how can you fight? Harry has your wand.”

“Oh, I think I know where to get another one.” Draco snickered under his breath. “And it goes along with a conversation I’ve been wanting to have for months now.”

*Father deserves to know I’m not leaving him entirely alone in the world.*

## Be Careful 102: What Face You Mask

Laughter cascaded in over Draco and Hermione as the barrier between them and the rest of their small group dropped away again. Harry had gone on one knee in his fight for breath, and Ron was leaning against the wall, wiping his eyes. Luna perched on a ledge in the wall, smiling. In the center of the floor, a knee-high wildcat with tall tufted ears and broad paws spun in rapid circles, apparently trying to get a glimpse of its own stubby tail.

Hermione stared. “What in Merlin’s name—”

“Ginny was afraid she wouldn’t be allowed to fight,” Luna said, jumping down from her seat. “So I let her have my Animagus amulet. It had one use left on it. Her form is good for fighting, don’t you think?”

“It will be if she can ever stop...” Hermione twirled a finger. “Ginny, what *are* you doing?”

“Ron asked her if she had any tail,” said Harry, getting control of himself. “She’s trying to figure it out.”

“Weasley!” Draco said in his most shocked tone. “And to your own sister!”

“Sod off, Malfoy,” retorted Ron good-naturedly. “Ginny, calm down, all right? It’s back there, it’s just small and hard to see. Besides, it doesn’t affect how well you can use the rest of what you’ve got, does it?”

“The dirty mind crew gets overtime tonight,” Draco murmured, and beckoned Luna closer. “See how things are going out there?”

Luna nodded and poked her head through the stone wall, then pulled it back. “Quite a lot of people,” she said. “I think it’s safe to let Harry see them now. He can’t send them all away.”

“Hold up one second...” Draco laid his hand on Luna’s shoulder and focused in the way that had become as familiar as Apparition since January, and Luke the mongoose scabbled up into his favorite observation post around Luna’s neck. *Ready now*, he chattered to her.

“Please?” Luna said under her breath, looking up at the intersection of wall and ceiling.

The inner wall melted away.

Harry clenched his teeth. It was the only way to keep his mouth from falling open in astonishment.

*Where did they all come from?*

*And what, exactly, are they expecting me to do?*

“Is your mysterious mission done or isn’t it?” asked Tonks, whose presence seemed to give Lupin the same feeling that the crowd packed into the Room was giving Harry.

“It is,” Hermione admitted, “but—”

“But what? If it’s done, that means we can go out and fight. If not, tell us what else needs to be done and we’ll do it. Right?” Tonks appealed to the other members of the Order and the DA, who answered with fierce nods, shouts of “Right!” and “You said it!” and even some outright growls.

“It’s not that simple!” Harry shouted. “We don’t even know where—where You-Know-Who is—”

“We don’t have to.”

Everyone turned and looked at the speaker.

It was Ron.

“We don’t have to know where he is,” Ron repeated, his face reddening but his voice firm and sure. “We can make him come to us.”

“How?” Lupin asked, voicing the question general to the room.

“Like this.” Ron swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and shut his eyes. “*Voldemort* .”

“That’ll just bring Snatchers down on us!” Lavender Brown shouted over the disappointed murmurs.

“To start with,” said Harry, and the room quieted at his voice. He barely noticed; his attention was turned inwards, on the chain of events unfolding in his mind. “Neville, do you have the Map?”

“Right here.” Neville came forward with it. “We keep it running so we know when we can slip out at night.”

“Let me have it.” Harry accepted the worn parchment and focused on it. *Show me the Headmaster’s office, he willed. I need to see who’s there.*

Lines blurred and reformed. A dot labeled “Severus Snape” sat behind the desk. Nothing else was in sight. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Lupin, Tonks, crowded around Harry, and the Room elevated its floor behind them as everyone tried to get a look at the Map—

“There!” Five or six voices shouted it at once, as new dots began to appear in front of the Headmaster’s fireplace. The names were unfamiliar, but after a few moments in colloquy with them, Snape’s dot moved a few inches away, and other dots began to converge on the Head’s office. “Alecto Carrow” and “Amycus Carrow,” “Minerva McGonagall” and “Filius Flitwick,” “Pomona Sprout” and, slowest of all, as if reluctant, “Horace Slughorn...”

“That’ll do,” Harry said, folding the Map and sliding it into his pocket. “I need good duelers. About a dozen. And someone who’s good with Transfiguration.”

Lupin coughed once. “May I suggest we ask Minerva to do that, once we’ve finished with them?”

Harry thumped the base of his hand against his forehead. “Right. Never mind. But I still need duelers. We have to take them down before they do us.”

*And send them back to their Master able to talk, but not to fight.*

Ron had the right idea. Now that Voldemort—*may as well start saying it again, there’s no more need to hide*—was out of Horcruxes, the sooner they could make him come out and fight, the better.

*And the best way to make him go anywhere is to let him know I’m there.*

He still didn’t like involving everyone else. But then, he hadn’t liked finding out he had this damned destiny in the first place, and not liking it hadn’t changed it a bit. He’d just have to work around it, and do his best to keep them all safe in spite of themselves.

*One good thing, we can send everyone who can’t fight out through the Hog’s Head. They’ll be safe in the village—it’ll be Hogwarts Voldemort wants, because “he’s at Hogwarts...”*

The phrase brought him a moment’s thought of Sirius, Sirius as Harry had first seen him, skeletal and filthy with the deadness of Azkaban in his eyes, but determined to fight past his sufferings for the sake of the truth.

*He never got a chance to finish that fight.*

*We’ll do it for him.*

*Tonight. Now.*

He turned and started up the stairs to the Room’s Hogwarts door, Lupin, Tonks, and a small band of mixed Order and DA members behind him.

---

A hand reached out of the crowd and snagged Ron’s sleeve as he started to follow Harry. “Ron, where’s Ginny?” its owner demanded. “I don’t see her anywhere—”

“Mum!” Ron put all the shock and horror he could muster into the word. “You don’t seriously

think we'd have brought her with us? She's still underage!"

"Well, I..." Mum faltered. "Good for you, then. I'm glad you have some sense. Has she been all right with you out there?"

"She was an angel," Ron said, crossing his fingers behind his back. "Never a moment's trouble."

Mum smiled fondly. "That's my girl. I'll go get your father, he'll be glad to see you..."

Fred and George closed in on Ron as Mum hurried off. "Nicely done," George said. "Tell her what she wants to hear, and let her draw her own conclusions."

"A classic move, and one I think you must have learned from us." Fred thrust out his chest.

"So where is our darling Gin-Gin, really?" asked George.

"Mrrowr," said a voice behind the twins.

Fred turned and looked searchingly at Ginny the lynx. "Don't tell me," he said finally. "You're doing something new with your hair."

A small choking noise came from Ron's left. Luke, on Luna's shoulders, had his face buried in her robes.

"Luna," George said with some concern. "Your little buddy there. Is he all right?"

"He's fine." Luna stroked her companion between the ears. "He just thinks you're funny."

Fred beamed. "He has good taste."

"Yes, he does," Hermione said quietly from behind Ron.

Ron decided making no comment whatsoever was the safest way to go.

---

*The die is cast, the gauntlet is thrown, and however many other ways there are of saying we're in for it now...*

Luke watched the end of the parade of underage students leaving the Great Hall. Those who were staying to fight—no Slytherins, which hadn't surprised him one bit, but a fair number of the other Houses' sixth and seventh years—were running here and there under the direction of their Heads of House, getting in each other's way and adding to the general impression that there was already a battle in progress here.

*Depending on how you define terms, there's already been one. Spells fired, at least.*

Harry's plan had worked perfectly—he had "appeared" in front of Snape, the four Heads of House,

the Carrows, and the team of Snatchers from the Ministry, and Alecto Carrow had pressed her Mark before anyone could stop her. McGonagall and Flitwick had promptly Stunned the two Carrows, while Sprout and the team Harry had brought dealt with the Snatchers.

*And Slughorn stood there and dithered and let Snape get away, out the nearest window and down to the gates to join what's coming for us. Without the faintest idea of what's coming for him, at my hand...*

Luke snapped his teeth a few times at the thought of the fate awaiting his Headmaster. *He does deserve it, just a little. He wouldn't if it weren't for how it ends, it would be too rough for what he's really done, but it's all of a piece so it's fine by me.*

*And I'm dithering. I should get ready for what I have to do.*

“Soon,” Luna whispered, twitching her head so that her hair fell across him, giving him a whiff of the fruity-earth smell of Dirigible Plums (one of his Aunt Andromeda’s hobbies was making scented soaps and shampoos). “I don’t want to leave you in there too long, I don’t know how well it will last, it might wear out and that’s the last thing you need is to have it suddenly crack while Voldemort’s looking at you...” She giggled. “I hadn’t realized how much I missed not being afraid to say that name. And soon, no one will ever need to be afraid to say it again.”

*Let's hope it really is soon.* Luke stuck his nose into Luna’s ear. *I think we should start upstairs now. The Room should reset to its original location once they're all out of it.*

Luna nodded and started out the door for the entrance hall, moving purposefully. No one stopped her, no one questioned her, but at the turn for the second floor another set of footsteps fell in behind her.

“I just wanted to see what you were doing,” Hermione said, pulling aside a tapestry to let Luna enter a secret passage. “If I shouldn’t, tell me and I’ll go away.”

Luke beckoned her to follow with his remaining front paw. *You can come,* he chattered aloud. *It might help to have an extra pair of hands.* A mongoose snicker. *Now that you have one again.*

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Very funny... wait, did I just understand you?”

“You share blood,” Luna said, jumping the vanishing step. “On purpose, instead of by accident like most people. It makes a difference.”

“Obviously.”

The rest of the climb was undertaken in silence. Finally they stood before the innocuous-seeming wall. The trolls in the tapestry were rushing back and forth as madly as the people in the Great Hall below, unsettled by the lack of a Head to report these interlopers to.

“So who requires the Room?” Hermione asked.

Luke jumped down and resumed his human form on the way. “I do,” Draco said, straightening from his crouch. “Or I will in a moment.” He turned to Luna and pulled her close, looking down at her. “Be careful, you understand me?” he said with as much strength as he could muster around the lump in his throat. “I’m not a Gryffindor. I can’t go on if I lose you.”

“You won’t lose me.” Luna brushed her finger across his lips. “I’ll find you before it’s all over, and we’ll make that last jump together.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

One hungry kiss, and Draco let her go. “Ready when you are,” he said.

Luna looked deep into his eyes, her gaze calm and hypnotic. “He’s telling a terrible story,” she chanted, “but it doesn’t diminish his glory...”

“That’s from *Pirates*, isn’t it?” Hermione’s voice echoed into Draco’s ears from a long way away. “What is it for?”

“It’s the activation for a mental mask. His mum put it in his mind when she gave him some of her strength, back when he got healed.”

“A mental mask?”

“To hide his thoughts from Legilimency. Like Headmaster Snape uses, and Voldemort.”

“Oh.” A moment’s pause. “What did you need me for?”

“I’ll say as soon as Draco opens the Room. There’s the door now.”

“What is he requiring it for?”

“A prison—quick, before he sees us—”

---

A prison. That was what this little dark room meant. He was a prisoner, held against his will.

“*Quick, before he sees us—*” And wild mocking laughter, and hands against his back, and he had stumbled forward into this tiny cell, the door slamming behind him before he could so much as catch his breath. His arm throbbed with pain, his limbs were weak and weary from a night and a day without food or proper rest, but one thought continued to obsess him. The Dark Lord must know how he had been tricked in Severus Snape.

*Amazing*, a tiny voice at the back of the mind commented. *I’ve even convinced myself!*

Ignoring the voice, Draco Malfoy continued to focus his will on the door. This might be a prison,

but no prison could hold him forever. He *would* escape, and he *would* tell his story to the Dark Lord.

*Of course you will*, chuckled the tiny voice. *But when the time is right, Draco. Only when the time is right.*

Outside, the shouts and screams of battle drew closer and closer.

The Death Eaters had entered Hogwarts.

## Be Careful 103: Whose Heart You Hold

It took an explosion that rocked the castle before the door of Draco's prison so much as budged, but once it had he was able to force it open with a few blows from his shoulder. Dust and dirt settled onto him as he pelted down the corridor in the direction of the Headmaster's office. A predominantly red-haired group, one member of which was far more still than it ought to be, passed through his sight momentarily and was gone.

*Serves him right, the outer Draco sneered. That's what happens when you ignore what's really called for, in those of us lucky enough to have pure blood...*

The inner Draco gritted his mental teeth and added another tally mark to the already overwhelming total of Voldemort's crimes, then pushed the thought aside for the moment. There was work to be done.

The mental mask he wore, a combination of his own memories and the dreams he'd once had of being the perfect junior Death Eater, ought to help convince Voldemort his wild story was true, but it wouldn't stand up to more than three sessions with Legilimency, and it controlled only his surface thoughts, not his actions. He was the one who'd have to make every word, every movement, that of a deeply wronged and wounded young man whose only thought was serving the Dark Lord and saving him from the unsuspected traitor.

*And if I fumble even once, if he starts suspecting and looks a little deeper, once he gets past the mask he'll never stop. There won't be any me by the time he gets done, just a breathing body he can use to transport him to the otherworld and back again, so he can conquer them both.*

"Dumbledore," he snapped at the gargoyle guarding the spiral staircase, and took the stairs two at a time.

*Not happening.*

*Not to me. Not to anyone.*

He reached the top and slammed open the door. The portrait frames along the walls were deserted—the past Heads must have gone to see the fighting, along with every other portrait in the castle. That suited Draco just fine, as it meant he didn't have to have a conversation which would have severely taxed the covering capabilities of the mask.

“Big portrait behind his desk,” he muttered aloud, hurrying to the frame he described. “Hidden compartment in back of it...”

To the outer Draco’s surprise, the portrait swung outward at his first pull. *It must not stay latched when the old coot’s not here to anchor it*, he decided, scooping up what lay within the compartment. *More fool he, for running off at a time like this.*

The inner Draco knew better. Dumbledore’s plan, mad and twisted as it was, was taking shape.

*And it’s only right that I should be the one to pull it off, since I’m the one who interfered with his first one working out.*

Thrusting his loot into his pocket and pushing the portrait back into place, he bolted for the stairs. The first part of his mission was accomplished. Now all he had to do was find the Dark Lord.

*He won’t be here, but he’ll be nearby. Somewhere he can listen, and watch. Father would have known where that was, once upon a time. Probably still does, but now he’s not trusted enough to be out here fighting. No, there’s only one person who’ll know what I need to find out.*

*And coincidentally, she likes me a lot.*

---

Remus’ back hit the stone floor of the entrance hall of Hogwarts, driving the wind from his lungs as his wand clattered against the nearest wall. Antonin Dolohov towered over him, leering.

*I’m going to die.*

With the acceptance of the fact, his eyes unfocused, looking past Dolohov to the great marble staircase he’d climbed so many times as both student and teacher. Bellatrix Lestrange stood halfway up, her face twisted into what passed for her smile as she took careful aim with her wand.

*I’ve seen her look like that before. Somewhere.*

Unbidden, the memory came. A dark room, lined with seats in the style of an ancient amphitheater, in its center a rough stone archway.

*She’s doing her work, the task she’s given herself. Cleansing her family name, destroying the ones she sees as unfit.*

*But the only member of her family here is—*

Remus’ eyes snapped shut, and opened again in another part of the hall. Everything felt strange, but he didn’t bother cataloguing differences. Instead he dived into the shelter of the stairs, trusting this body’s instincts to save the fall from being too rough. A flash of green behind him, and a brush against the sole of one shoe, told him how close the call had been.

*Too close. But she’s alive.*

*And I'm not, or I shouldn't be...*

Across the hall, a brown-and-gray blur slammed itself against Dolohov's legs, snatched the wand from his hand as he fell, and Stunned and tied him up in one fluid motion.

*Or maybe I should.*

**Never,** said an acid voice at the back of his mind, **do that to me again.**

**What? Take over your body without your permission, or save your life?**

**Neither, you dope! Nearly get killed yourself!**

**Oh. I beg your pardon.**

**You should. Give me back my body and come find me. We'll fight together from now on.**

**What a very good idea.** Remus shut his eyes, or Tonks' eyes, once more and willed himself home. **I'll see you soon.**

**Yes, you will, and if you don't, I'll know the reason why!**

---

Rocking Teddy in her arms, Andromeda stiffened as her internal telltale for the curse she had laid over Bellatrix tightened painfully. *No—not my daughter—*

The knot loosened, and Andromeda breathed again. Nymphadora had escaped, by what means she did not know.

*But obviously Bellatrix does not take me seriously.*

*Perhaps I should change that.*

Smiling grimly to herself, she settled Teddy in his cot and left the room.

No wise Healer placed a spell on a patient without knowing some way to enable it manually.

---

“Aunt Bella!” Draco caught at her arm, dodged her automatic swing of the wand, and held up his hand to show it empty, turning the motion into a frantic beckoning. “I need your help!”

“Where have you been since yesterday?” his aunt demanded, yanking him into the nearest hallway. “And what have you done to yourself? Your arm—”

“Snape's a traitor,” Draco cut her off. “Dumbledore's man, he always was. He's going to give us away to Potter if he gets the chance. I have to see the Dark Lord, right away. Where is he?”

“In Hogsmeade, in the Shrieking Shack, but the Apparition wards—”

“I can’t let them stop me!” A bit of his very real desperation slipped out through the mask, and all at once Draco knew exactly how he would get to the Shrieking Shack. “I’ve got to find a way! I’ve got to—I—”

He spun in place and, judging by the expression on Aunt Bella’s face, apparently vanished.

*Whereas in reality I have merely become smaller.*

*Quite a lot smaller.*

---

Andromeda stood in the center of her living room, arms upraised in gentle curves, eyes closed. In her mind, in her heart, she was reliving her life, as though she and not her daughter had just passed through the nearness of death.

*That childhood. So cramped, so stilted, so unnatural a thing, and yet I managed to learn what love was, and that I could never live without it. How it is that I did, and my sisters did not, I suppose I shall never know.*

Then her Hogwarts years, the triumphs and despairs of learning magic, the decision to dedicate her own life to saving others, and the fumbling awakening to just what it meant that she sought the company of a stocky Hufflepuff in the year above her own to the exclusion of all others. She had feared so greatly that he could not, would not, did not, but he had soothed away those fears as he had all her others, with deft touches of his broad hands and his soft lips on hers.

*Oh, I have known love indeed. Love passionate and boiling hot, love quiet and simmering warm, the one for nights and the other for days. He had always a laugh, a smile, a touch, a turn of the head, that could make me love him more than I had the minute before, and he swore I had the same.*

Their daughter’s birth had drawn them even closer, turned them into a two-world system with a little pink-haired witch as the sun. By turns each parent spoiled and corrected, pampered and disciplined, and somehow the girl grew up as normal as most magical children ever did. When Nymphadora chose to become an Auror, Andromeda thought her heart would burst with mingled fear and pride, and Ted swelled his chest in public and shed tears of terror in private.

“Parents aren’t meant to outlive their children,” he’d told his wife, his voice shaking in a way he never let his daughter hear. “What are we going to do if we lose her?”

*In some ways, I am glad he is gone.*

*He would not approve of the answer I am about to give to that question.*

Andromeda brought her palms slowly together, imagining the air between her hands being

squeezed more and more tightly with every passing instant. *Those on whom my curse now rests, let them suffer this same fate*, she willed, her two brutal brothers-in-law firmly before her mental eyes. *Let their hearts be wrung and strained for the sake of hate, as mine has been for the sake of love, and give them no rest or respite unless they can summon up some tiny piece of love for some living creature other than themselves...*

---

Luke's three-legged, limping run down the stairs and towards the Whomping Willow took on the qualities of a nightmare, which Draco thought was just fine. The less his mask-self remembered of the journey, the better.

*Let him, and his dear Dark Lord, assume necessity and accidental magic combined to crack the Apparition wards this once. Who knows, it might even be possible.*

He slipped between the thrashing branches of the tree and into the cramped tunnel, bounding along as quickly as he could manage. His mind was clearing, and that wasn't good.

*If I run up against some big contradiction, something I can obviously do that doesn't fit the mind and the world of the brat I used to be, it could break the mask before I ever get to use it. Even if I can hang onto it, it won't be as strong as it was before. But this was the only way to get here in time, truly it was...*

A familiar voice warned him just in time that he was approaching the other end of the tunnel. "Here he is, my lord. Must I stay?"

"No, Lucius, you may go," the Dark Lord answered smoothly. "My business with Severus is private."

*Perfect. Here we go.*

Luke scurried out of the tunnel and around the darkest edge of the shabby room, nipped out the door between his father's feet, and was staggering, human, into the entryway when Lucius turned around. "Father," he choked out, bringing the mask to the fore again. *My father, my idol, everything in life I've ever wanted to be...*

"Draco!" Lucius caught him into what felt suspiciously like an embrace, then let him go to look him over anxiously. "Merlin's blood, your arm—"

"It doesn't hurt now," Draco fibbed, coughing on the last word. Lucius conjured a glass of water, and Draco gulped half of it down. "Thanks," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "It'd been a while. Was that Snape I saw with you? Is the Dark Lord here?"

"Yes, yes, but what does that matter? You're here—"

"To expose Snape for what he really is," interrupted Draco. "He's a traitor, Father, a traitor and a spy. Dumbledore's man to the core." He held up his bandaged stump before Lucius' horrified,

fascinated eyes. “And he burned my Mark out of my flesh to stop me telling the Dark Lord that.”

*One truth, one lie, and the verdict on the mask is...* The inner Draco swore to himself at the results of his impromptu test. *Not good. It'll last me one go-round with Legilimency, but only one.*

*Here's hoping one is all I need.*

Leaning on his father's arm, Draco made his entrance for the role of a lifetime.

## Be Careful 104: What Fate You Deserve

“Why doesn’t it work for me, Severus?”

“My lord?” Severus hedged, his heart beating out a rhythm of failure in his ears. *I was so close. So close to finding the Potter brat and telling him what he must hear, so close to ensuring we could win. And now this. There is no justice and no mercy in this world, nothing but blind chance and whatever we can make and keep for ourselves...*

The door at the other end of the room opened. Voldemort turned, scowling. “Who dares—”

“I beg your pardon, my lord,” Lucius said. “This cannot wait.”

He advanced into the room, supporting—

*Merlin's boots.* “And where have you been?” Severus asked a dusty and tattered Draco acerbically.

Draco directed a vicious glare at Severus’ left ear. “As if you didn’t know.” He turned towards Voldemort and executed as much of a bow as he was able without falling over. “My lord, forgive the lack of ceremony, and my personal appearance. I’ve been imprisoned for the last... well, since whenever you last heard about me. One loses track of time.”

“Imprisoned?” Voldemort repeated, glancing sidelong at Severus. “Where?”

“At Hogwarts. Or so I assume, since I don’t recall leaving and that’s certainly where I was when I broke out.”

“Nonsense,” Severus snapped, wondering in the back of his mind what the boy was playing at now. “How could you be imprisoned at Hogwarts without my knowing about it?”

A vindictive smile made its appearance on Draco’s face. “Who said you didn’t know about it, *sir*?” He faced Voldemort squarely. “My lord, I can tell you why the Elder Wand doesn’t work for you. It doesn’t work because Severus Snape is a traitor to your cause. He’s Dumbledore’s, he always has been, ever since you threatened the Mudblood who spawned Harry Potter!”

Severus forced himself to remain still, but could not stop his fists from clenching. *He dares—after I pitied him, thought him worthy of better than he was born to, he dares—*

“Explain,” Voldemort said slowly. “And do it well.”

“It began earlier this year.” Draco had his arms pressed against his stomach, and Severus noticed irrelevantly that the left had a bit of white cloth covering it halfway up the forearm. “I was out by the lake one evening when I saw someone in black robes headed for that stupid tomb. They bent over it a while, then went back inside. I followed. They went up to the Head’s office and never came out. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, just one of those things that happens at Hogwarts sometimes.”

*Who in the world...* Severus banished his curiosity. This was no time for idle questions.

“But then yesterday afternoon, I finally found out what I’d been trying to for a week. The spot where Longbottom and his little gang of malcontents were hiding.” Draco curled his lip as he pronounced the Gryffindor’s name. “I thought that should go straight to the Headmaster, so I went up to his office—I’d got the password from Professor Carrow a few days ago when he asked me to carry a note—and I was about to go in when I heard voices.”

*Voices in my office, yesterday afternoon? I was never in it until well into the night...*

“He,” Draco’s finger stabbed towards Severus though his eyes never left Voldemort’s face, “was talking with that portrait of Dumbledore. Joking about how well they’d fooled you, how you couldn’t see the truth even when it was right in front of your eyes. Reminding each other of all the times he’s ruined your plans, the things he’s told the Order of the Phoenix in plain sight, the lies he’s fed you to keep Dumbledore’s plans going. Finally they had a bloody good laugh over the way they’d kept you from getting your hands on the Elder Wand!”

“And what was that?” Voldemort’s voice was at its quietest, its silkiest smoothness; his face was as placid as a pond. This was the Dark Lord’s most dangerous mood, and Severus felt his grasp on his Occlumency slipping.

*Having Lucius smirking at me from across the room does not help. How Draco knows these things, when the conversations he quotes so blithely never happened... but more than half of what he says is true, and I doubt I can hide that any longer...*

“Have Snape kill Dumbledore against your orders, and then hide the Elder Wand before you could find it,” Draco replied promptly. “It was in a compartment back of Dumbledore’s portrait, so the old coot could decide who got their hands on it even after he was gone. Lucky for me he’s off seeing the fighting just now. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“So you are.” Voldemort ran his fingers up and down the wand he still held in his hand. “Why did you not press your Mark to summon me so that I could hear this treason for myself?”

“I was about to, when old bat ears over there heard me outside his door.” Draco shot another look at Severus, this time past his right shoulder. “He grabbed me before I could get my sleeve pulled back, tied me up, and threw me in a corner. Then he and his painty friend had a lovely long discussion about what to do with me, making sure I could hear every word of it. They finally

decided not to kill me—he’s still Headmaster, I’m still a student, it’s not *nice*, you know—but they’d lock me up until, direct quote, ‘it’s all over with.’ After that, they said, it wouldn’t matter what I knew.”

Voldemort smiled, a flickering expression like the dart of a snake’s tongue. “That makes sense. But they could scarcely leave you tied for an indefinite period, and once you had the freedom of your hands you could easily press your Mark.”

“Of course I could.” Draco lifted his arms to chest level, letting his sleeves fall away from them. “If I still had it.”

Severus barely had time to notice the shortening of Draco’s left arm, the dirty white bandage that wrapped it, when Lucius spat an oath and yanked his wand clear of his pocket. “*Crucio!*”

Ducking the Unforgivable and fumbling out his own wand, Severus opened his mouth to cast *Sectumsempra* —

*“Enough.”*

The word reverberated through the room as though it had been shouted, though the tone was even and calm. Severus clenched his teeth against the pain in his head. Lucius clapped his hands over his ears. Draco winced, but returned to unwinding the bandage around his stump at Voldemort’s twitch of a finger. “Done with Fiendfyre, my lord,” he said, holding up the angry red flesh for observation. “Dumbledore told him it was the only way to counter the level of magic you’d put into the Mark.”

“Did he.” Voldemort gave the remains of the arm a cursory examination, then nodded once. Draco quickly whipped the bandage around it once more and let the sleeve of his robes cover it from view.

“Lucius, kindly allow me to deal with this,” the Dark Lord continued. “I realize you want to avenge your son’s wrongs, but my claims must take precedence.”

“Forgive me, my lord.” Lucius slid his wand away, casting a gloating look at Severus. “I was carried away by paternal affection. It won’t happen again.”

Seeking somewhere to look that didn’t inspire him with the urge to punch Lucius in the face, Severus happened to glance towards Draco, and caught the boy’s lips moving in the tail end of a silent phrase.

*Did he just say “I bet it won’t”?*

*Something here is very far from right.*

*As though I did not know that already.*

“Look into my eyes, Draco,” the Dark Lord commanded. “Let me be sure you have told me the

truth, before I do anything irreversible.”

“Yes, my lord.” Draco straightened his shoulders and looked fearlessly into the slit-pupiled red eyes.

*Last Christmas, he could keep me out with Occlumency, but only because I did not care to take the time and effort of breaking down his barriers, and run the risk of harming him thereby. The Dark Lord has no such scruples, and proved that less than a year ago. Has Draco improved so very much since then, that he can convince Voldemort of these senseless, baseless lies?*

“I see.” Voldemort turned away. Draco slumped, but caught himself on the wall, and Lucius hurried forward to hold him up. “I see now. It makes sense of a great deal.”

*Apparently he has.*

Draco tilted his head to look affectionately up at his father. The pose put Severus in mind of—

*No. No! I cannot—not now—*

“Severus.” The voice had lost all semblance of humor. “Look at me.”

Ruthlessly, Severus buried his thoughts of Cecilia behind a torrent of other memories. There would be that much of him unsullied, even after what was to come.

*And in some respects, it will be its own reward.*

“As you wish,” he said, summoning all the bitterness he had masked for eighteen years. “My lord.”

Exactly as Draco had done, he looked Voldemort straight in the eye, and summoned what he most wanted the Dark Lord to see.

*Yes, I loved Lily Evans. She was worthy of any man’s love, her blood notwithstanding. The day I broke with her was the day I regret the most from my entire life. If I have any claim to goodness at all, it is because of her and my love for her. And I have never stopped hating the vile creature in the shape of a man who killed her, and the even viler one who condemned her to die because he thought carrying tales would bring him favor. If I had known what harm my words could do to her, I would have cut out my own tongue first...*

The contact ended. Severus could not stop himself from gasping, but managed to remain upright without staggering more than a step. His throat was tight and dry, as though he had been crying, or screaming.

*Perhaps I was.*

“You wish you had cut out your tongue rather than harm your precious Mudblood, Severus,” Voldemort said aloud, smiling openly now. “I may grant your wish, or the half of it which remains

in my power. But first..." He turned away. "Draco, my wand."

Draco reached into his pocket and withdrew the long, slender rod of elder wood Severus had seen in Dumbledore's hand so many times. "Here it is, my lord," he said, extending it to Voldemort, grip first. "When the castle was attacked, all the portraits ran away to see the fun, even Dumblesnore. Won't it be fun telling him how he doomed his own precious plan?"

"Yes, it will." Voldemort closed his fingers about the Elder Wand. "Before I take his portrait from the wall and destroy it, and him, forever. But that can wait until after I have dealt with Harry Potter, and that in its turn must wait until this wand is truly mine." He looked up at the two Malfoys. "Await me in the Forest. Lucius, you know the way."

Lucius bowed and turned to go, but Draco twisted his fingers into his empty sleeve and looked up through his eyelashes. "Please, my lord," he said, his tone syrup-sweet and wheedling. "I've never seen anyone's tongue cut out before..."

Voldemort laughed aloud. "Now, now, Draco, my mind is not made up yet. I may only kill him after all."

"But then I'll get to see him die instead. And I do want to see that." Draco's eyes were alight with unholy glee. "Please, my lord? To make up for losing my Mark?"

"If you insist." Voldemort's tone was that of an indulgent uncle to a petted nephew. "I will see what can be done for your arm after this night is over, and find out what you would like best for a reward. For now, I must settle for gratifying this one desire. Can you find your own way to the acromantulas' clearing in the Forest?"

Severus heard Draco's affirmative answer through a distant buzzing in his ears, as though his own *Muffliato* charm had been laid over him. *So this is your son's gratitude, Narcissa. This is how he repays me for saving his worthless life. I wish I had let the Vow kill me—it would have been a better ending than this squalid disgrace...*

From his pocket, Voldemort drew something long and curved and obscenely sharp. "A last gift from my dear Nagini," he said, sliding a finger along the smooth surface of the fang. "Shed only days before she died. This seems the proper occasion for its use."

Lucius stood in the doorway, his sunken eyes glittering in triumph. Draco had his back to the wall; his breath came in quick gasps, and his hand pressed against his chest as though the excitement were too much for him.

"Goodbye, Severus," said Voldemort, and thrust the fang into Severus' neck.

The initial explosion of pain was followed so quickly by paralyzing weakness that Severus never had a chance to cry out. He felt himself falling to the floor, saw Voldemort drawing Lucius out of the room in his wake in the same glance as he noticed his own robes becoming saturated with blood below the wound—Draco was straightening up, his lips were moving, he was saying

something—

“Come on”? Who—

Movement on his other side, disjointed, fragmented, suddenly became an impossible vision, a dark-haired boy kneeling beside him, staring down with stricken eyes—*Lily’s eyes*—

“Take it,” Severus choked, forcing the memories that held his story to the front of his mind, thrusting them out in a form that could be collected and watched. “Take it..”

The boy’s wand shook in his hand, but he drew the silver fog into the flask and capped it safely, and Severus felt a great peace overcome him. He had not failed his trust.

“Look... at... me...”

He was not sure if the words were a command or a plea, but Harry Potter bent over him once more, and their eyes locked. Without meaning to, he saw a flicker of Harry’s memories, of Draco’s hand curled around a flask like the one Harry still held, and thrust it angrily away. He wanted to think of Lily, of Lily and all she had meant to him, all he had done for her sake. It was a profanation to think of Draco Malfoy in his last moments of life, even if Draco did remind him in some indefinable way of Cecilia...

Darkness wiped out his vision, silence filled his hearing. He floated alone in nothingness, the dimmest light imaginable gleaming far above him. If he desired to go towards it, he wondered, would he? Might it grow brighter as he approached? Were the stories of his childhood, the tales of peace and forgiveness and loved ones waiting, true after all?

He set his will towards that distant light, and felt his self, his soul as it must be, beginning to rise up—

An indefinable force snatched at him, caught him, pulled him backwards and flung him against a stiffly yielding surface. With a soundless slam, the light disappeared, and he was trapped in blackness absolute and unchanging. Control fled; Severus Snape screamed like a little boy afraid of the dark.

*He has won. Voldemort has defeated me. His Mark is on the soul as well as the body, and that lets him bind me to the world even past my death. He can hold me here forever, conjure whatever torments he pleases, or simply leave me in eternal night, and no one will ever know...*

## Be Careful 105: What Hopes You Cherish

Harry looked up at Draco over Snape's body. "You're going to have to explain this one," he said.

"Can't. No time." Draco flipped shut the lid of the soul flask and tucked it back inside his robes. "Go do what he wanted you to. I'll see you before it's all over."

"Since when do you give me orders?"

"Fine, it's a suggestion," Draco snapped, his patience wearing thin. "Do whatever you damn well please. I have somewhere else to be." He turned his attention to the other two occupants of the room, nodding briefly to Hermione, who returned the gesture, before facing Ron. "Sorry about your brother," he said, repressing an inappropriate laugh. "In caelo intret semihora ante malum scit mortuus est."

While all three of them were still staring at him, he bowed, transformed into Luke, and darted between them and back into the secret passage onto Hogwarts' grounds. Ron's voice followed him. "*What did he say?*"

"It was Latin." Hermione seemed torn between laughter and tears. "It means, 'May he be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows he's dead.'"

Luke snickered to himself. *Damn, she's good.*

Out the other end of the tunnel he shot, weaving deftly among the Whomping Willow's reactivated branches, and followed his ears into the Forest.

*It's finally time for that conversation with my father dearest I've been dying to have all year...*

His limping pawbeats slowed and stopped.

*Except I don't know if I want to have it anymore.*

*At least, not for the same reason.*

He rose to his hind legs and stood up human, hurrying towards the distant light of torches.

*What the hell. I'll figure it out as I go along, like I do everything else.*

“What news, my Death Eaters?” Voldemort’s voice called from up ahead, a murmur of welcome and greetings sounding underneath his words.

“We lost half a dozen, they have a few more to mourn,” Bellatrix answered. “And a captive, as you can see.” A round of snickers from the Death Eaters. “No sign of Potter yet.”

“Very well.” Voldemort, whose shape Draco could now see, tapped the Elder Wand against his throat and began to speak, his voice magically amplified to carry over all of Hogwarts. “You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery...”

“What’s wrong?” Draco heard Lucius asking his aunt in an undertone. “Is it Rodolphus?”

“Rodolphus *and* Rabastan. Neither of them marked, both looking surprised.” Aunt Bella shook her head. “I underestimated my sister. But she did say she would kill them if I attacked her half-blood brat or its werewolf mate, and she is a Black...”

“Did you get them?” asked Draco, coming into the light.

Aunt Bella scowled. “No. The girl dodged my spell, and Dolohov waited a second too long once he had the werewolf down. Still, it isn’t over yet.” She cast a worshipful look at Voldemort, who had finished his harangue and was directing Rowle to kindle a fire in the center of the clearing. “One hour, that’s all we have to wait, and then Potter will come and our Master will win his final battle and defeat death forever...”

*You keep on believing that, auntie. Hope it makes you happy.* Draco tapped Lucius on the arm. “Come aside with me?” he asked when his father looked around. “I want to talk to you.”

Lucius smiled. “Of course. Excuse us, Bellatrix?”

She waved at them absently, her eyes still fixed on Voldemort.

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Lucius tried to analyze the unusual feeling in his chest as he followed his son out of the torchlit clearing. After a few moments, he began to suspect that he was happy.

*It has been long enough since such was the case that I’m not surprised I don’t recognize it. But it should no longer be strange to me after tonight. With my Master so close to winning, that insufferable prig Severus as dead as a traitor deserves to be, and my son returned to me, what can go wrong?*

The thought was barely complete in his mind when he walked into Draco, who had stopped at the edge of a smaller clearing about a hundred yards from the one they had left. “I beg your pardon —”

“No, it’s my fault—”

“I should have looked where I was going—”

“I shouldn’t have stopped in your way—”

They both laughed at the sound of their absurd crosstalk.

“It’s been too long since we could share a joke,” Draco said, raising his wand. “*Lumos libera.*” A glowing globe sprang into existence above their heads, shedding a silvery light over the clearing.

Lucius frowned. “I thought Severus had taken your wand when he imprisoned you.”

“That does seem like an obvious step,” Draco agreed, leaning against a tree.

“Then where—ah.” Lucius chuckled as he recognized the wand his son was now twirling between his fingers. “I should pay more attention to my pockets. Smoothly done. Give it back now.”

Draco flipped the wand into the air and caught it. “No.”

Holding his anger in check, Lucius kept his voice soft. “Draco, jokes are all very well and good in their place, but I will be expected to fight later.”

“I know.” Another flip and catch. “But I took it away from you.” Another. “That makes it my wand now, not yours.” Another. “Funny how that works, isn’t it? You keep what you can grab.” The wand rolled across his palm, caught at the last second by his fingertips. “Rather like life.”

“Like... life?”

“Life. You know, that thing we’re both plodding through with our eyes and our ears shut to all the best things it’s got to offer.” Draco balanced the wand on one finger, then tucked it away inside his robes. “Or I was, until I got woken up this past summer.”

Lucius had the uncanny sensation of being poised on a precipice. “What are you talking about?”

“I hated you for a long time after I found out what I’d been missing,” Draco went on, as though he hadn’t heard what Lucius had said. “First for stopping me from getting to the things I wanted. Then for not teaching me how to get them years and years ago. Finally, of course, there was Mother, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. It’s only tonight that I’ve come to the oddest conclusion.” He regarded Lucius levelly. “I don’t hate you anymore.”

*Thank you* sounded inane as a response to this, as did *Why not?* Lucius settled for a politely quizzical look.

“Oh, it surprised me too.” Draco reached up and caught hold of a tree branch above his head, setting his foot into a crack and pulling himself upwards. “I was angry about it. I wanted to hate you. But my feelings are what they are, and they say I don’t hate you anymore.” He straddled the branch, crossing his feet under it. “I’m sorry for you, if that makes you feel any better about it.”

“Sorry... for me?” *None of this makes sense... was I dreaming the last ten minutes, or am I dreaming now?*

“Yes, sorry for you. I’d feel sorry for anyone in your position, but I can’t help feeling a little more for you, because whether I like it or not, you’re my father.”

“Whether you like it or not?” *I must find something to say besides repeating what he is saying. It makes me sound peculiar.*

*Of course, that matches the way I feel.*

The rock of the precipice was crumbling beneath his mental feet. In a very few moments he would be falling, and no one was likely to come to his aid...

“You’ve got no idea what I’m talking about by your position, do you?” Draco leaned forward, shifting his weight until he lay face down on the branch. “Let me jog your memory a little. When I was little, just a baby really, you taught me a trick. A certain phrase I was supposed to say whenever you asked me to do something. Every time your friends came over, you’d show it off. ‘Draco, go upstairs and change your robes,’ you’d say. Or, ‘Draco, come here and say hello.’ Do you remember what I was supposed to say back to you?”

The memory drew a faint smile from Lucius. “‘What’s in it for me?’” he quoted.

“Exactly. ‘It’s the Slytherin mantra, my son,’ you would tell me afterwards. ‘Never forget it. Live your life by it.’” Draco looked searchingly at him. “When did you stop taking your own advice?”

Lucius scowled at him. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. Or you would if you’d think about it a little. That—” Draco’s finger pointed back towards the torchlight. “—is *evil*, Father. Evil is interested only in itself. Cuts its losses without a second thought. And until tonight, to him, we were losses.”

“You. Are lecturing me. On the nature of evil.” Lucius made his tone utterly flat, hoping to awaken Draco to his own sense of the ridiculous.

“You don’t seem to have noticed it,” Draco retorted. “Or if you did, you deluded yourself another way, by believing you could always come out on top. That’s just not possible. Everyone makes mistakes, and sometimes you won’t have a convenient sacrifice to throw to the wolves.” His eyes sparked in the silvery light. “Not everyone’s as obliging as Mother.”

“Do *not* mention her to me,” Lucius hissed. “She was my *wife*—do you think I cared nothing about her? I did what I did to save *you*, and you would do well to remember that!”

Draco sneered down at him. “Don’t give me that. You killed her to save me? What about yourself?” An accusing finger pointed directly at Lucius’ chest. “Why didn’t *you* volunteer to die?”

“I... I...” Lucius stammered.

“Never even thought of that, did you?” Draco shook his head, laughing humorlessly under his breath. “It never crossed your mind, not once, that of the three of us, you were the one who’d be missed the least. So you killed Mother to save me, and lost me anyway. Not that I’d have stuck around if you’d killed yourself instead, but I might have thought better of you.”

Trying to find some foothold within this preposterous paragraph, Lucius found himself hearing again an incongruous pair of words. “Stuck around? Where, pray tell, are you going?”

“Away.” Draco waved an airy hand. “Far, far away. Somewhere no one’s ever heard of Malfoys or Dark Lords or any of this. Somewhere people look at me and don’t see your son or the hope of Slytherin House or the boy who failed to kill Albus Dumbledore—they see *me*. Which is incidentally one of those things I wish you’d taught me, is how to have my own identity. But I seem to have worked it out.”

Lucius was the one who laughed this time, a brittle sound that didn’t seem to belong to him at all. “It must be quite far indeed if no one has heard our name there. I’d think you’d be lonely.”

“Oh, not so you’d notice.” Draco rubbed at a lump in his robes with a secret smile. “The people there are good company, and I’m bringing some of my own. I think it’s only fair to tell you now, since I’m afraid I can’t invite you—I’m going to be marrying Luna Lovegood sometime soon. Probably next month.”

“*Lovegood ?*” *She is pureblood, but that is all that is acceptable about her...* “How dare you!”

“No, how dare you!” Draco swung his leg over the branch and dropped to his feet in front of Lucius. “How dare you think you have any right to interfere in my life now that I’ve finally made something worthwhile out of it despite the hash you gave me to start with! Do you remember how I celebrated my seventeenth birthday, my coming of age, the day that should have shown you what a good job you did raising a wizard and a man? Oh, that’s right, you can’t remember it, because you weren’t there. You were in Azkaban. But you heard about it, and you saw me afterwards, what I was like. Didn’t you ever wonder how I could have recovered from it?”

Lucius returned Draco’s angry glare with a veneer of cold indifference. “I await your disclosure with bated breath.”

“I... went away one night.” Again the waved hand dismissed the mechanics as unimportant. “After I’d finally realized that I wasn’t even strong enough to stand on my own two feet, and that by everything you ever taught me, my weakness made me a worthless piece of garbage. But the people I met in this other place wouldn’t accept that. They saw my weakness, but instead of throwing me away for it, they helped me. They taught me how to be strong, most of them without realizing what they were doing, and I owe them everything because of that.”

“Can the secret of this great strength be shared?” Lucius asked, letting his lips curl into a cool smile at the suspicious gleam in Draco’s eyes.

Draco shook his head. “I could say the words, but you haven’t got the kind of mind that would understand them. It would sound like gibberish, or like weakness itself. But you’ve seen the results.” He grinned. “Haven’t I been strong, all this year? Haven’t I been the son you always wanted?”

“You have,” Lucius said, feeling the second-to-last rock slip from under his mind’s feet. “Why do you ask?”

“Just enjoying the irony.” Draco chuckled under his breath. “The one time in my life I do things you approve of, I’m actually working with the other side.”

“With the other...” Lucius backed away. “So *you* are the...”

“Now don’t misunderstand me.” Draco kept pace with Lucius, one step forward for every step back. “Most of what I said about Snape was true. He *did* love Potter’s mother, he *did* change sides when she was first threatened, he *has* been Dumbledore’s man all this time. But he never imprisoned me or stole the Elder Wand. I made that up so the Dark Lord—so *Voldemort*—would trust me.” He laughed aloud this time, triumphantly. “You hear that, Father? Your Master trusts me. Me, who let Granger and Ollivander go this past fall, who helped Ginny Weasley escape this winter, who brought down my own house to get Weasley and Granger out safely this spring.”

*And he accuses me of killing Narcissa...*

The words formed in Lucius’ thoughts, but they would not on his tongue. Tree bark grated rough against his palms. In his mind, the last rock had given way and he was falling, falling through endless dark despair.

“Me.” Draco leaned in close to Lucius, positively beaming. “Who’s been ferreting out the things that keep him from dying and sending them on to Harry Potter to be destroyed as fast as ever I can.”

“Traitor,” Lucius breathed.

Draco cocked his head thoughtfully. “Would you call an animal born in captivity a traitor if it escaped? That’s really all I’ve done. Escaped the cage you brought me up in, the cage you’re still inside. And that’s why I’m sorry for you. You’ll live and die in your cage, and you’ll insist to the last second of your life that it’s the whole world. Maybe you’ll admit that there might be a little something beyond the bars, but you’ll be positive the uncouth outside could never be as good as your wondrous inside. And meanwhile there’s *life* going on out here.” He spread his arms as wide as one and a half arms could go. “There’s music and laughter and love and all the things you think don’t matter. I wish I could show you how wrong you are. But I know I can’t.”

*He was right. His marvelous discovery is gibberish to me. It obviously has great meaning to him, since he has betrayed everything I taught him for it, but to me it conveys nothing more than a warning I must bring to my Master...*

“If you’re thinking of telling Voldemort about this,” Draco added, “don’t. He won’t want to hear anything against me tonight, not after I brought him what he wanted. You’d be more likely to catch a Killing Curse for lying about me.”

“Why warn me?” Lucius croaked. His voice sounded in his ears like his father’s, in the last year before the old man’s death.

“I don’t like you much, but I don’t want your death on my conscience. I’ve got too much to do with my life to let that get in the way. So consider yourself warned.” Draco turned to start back to the large clearing, then paused. “You might also want to know,” he said. “Hermione Granger didn’t have Malfoy blood when she visited us this spring. She does now, though. I took her as a blood-sister a week or two ago.”

*In case there was any stone of degradation yet left unturned.* Lucius wasn’t sure how much more he could take. “Why?”

“I didn’t want to leave you completely alone in the world when I went away.” Draco grinned again. “Not to mention, without a clear legal heir. I’m sure Hermione will find something suitable to do with the vault and the estates.” He glanced at the place where his left wrist wasn’t and tsked. “Look at the time. Harry should be along soon. I’d better get back. Coming, Father?”

“Go,” Lucius said, staring at the ground. “Just... go.”

Draco went. Lucius waited until his son’s shape was lost among the trees, then sank to the ground and covered his face with his hands.

*Is it possible any living man could be more wretched than I am tonight?*

## Be Careful 106: Whose Love You Desire

“Severus!”

Light, sound, sensation returned as abruptly as they had vanished. He stood at one end of a narrow, roofed area, open to the outdoors on three sides, one of which had train tracks running along it. A woman hurried towards him, her lips still parted from calling his name, the green eyes she had bequeathed to her son bright with joy.

*Laying it on rather thick, I see. Severus deliberately turned his back, folding his arms across his chest. A place that means hope and new beginnings to me, and the one person I had most desired to see.*

*Even had I not been warned, some things are still too good to be true.*

Behind him, an exasperated sigh. “I can’t say I wasn’t expecting you to be difficult, Sev, but this is a bit much. Don’t I even rate a hello after all this time?”

*Perhaps if you truly were who you appear to be...* “No,” Severus said aloud.

“Well, that’s put me in my place, hasn’t it?” The voice grew warm and rich with overtones of laughter, exactly the way he had always loved to hear it. “At least turn around and look at me if you won’t say hi. I can’t imagine I’m that repulsive to you.”

“No,” Severus repeated, allowing a bit of his rising anger to enter his tones. *This is not only a despicably low trick but insulting to her memory. To use her face, her voice, her spirit of love and life, to persuade me nothing is wrong and encourage me to trust before destroying my hopes... if I could reach you at this moment, Voldemort, there would be one fewer Dark Lord in the world.*

“Stubborn as ever, I see. All right, here’s how we’ll do things. If you’re not facing me within five seconds, I’m going to hang you up by an ankle and see if you’ve learned anything about wearing clean underwear since the last time we met.”

*That does it.* Severus whirled, glaring down at the semblance of Lily Evans. “How dare you,” he snarled into her face. “How dare you stand here, wearing *her* likeness, and make reference to *that*?”

“You know me, Sev. I’d dare almost anything if it got me what I wanted.” Lily held up a hand as

Severus started to retort. “No, let me finish. You can shout at me after I’m done talking. I don’t have much to say. Agreed?”

Severus gave a curt nod. *There is no need for me to believe anything this fantasy-puppet tells me, but it goes against my grain to be rude even to Lily’s image. I can return to ignoring her when she is through speaking.*

“I know what you’re afraid of,” Lily said bluntly. “It isn’t true, and I can prove it—hear me out!” She snapped the last three words over the beginning of Severus’ heated denial. “Merlin’s striped pajamas, haven’t you picked up any manners in the last twenty years? As I was saying, you’re a Legilimens. You can see someone’s memories, catch her surface thoughts, sense how her mind works. So…” She lifted her head and looked him full in the face. “Try it on me.”

“Why?” Severus asked suspiciously, directing his gaze over her shoulder. “What good will it do?”

“You used to be smarter than this,” Lily teased. “Think, Sev! If I’m made up, either you or Voldemort has to have done the making—and that means *all* the making, thoughts and everything! Don’t you believe you could tell the difference between the way you think and the way I do? I’d certainly hope you could for Voldemort!”

Severus turned to look out over the train tracks, his mind racing. *It sounds plausible enough. Certainly Voldemort could never hope to reproduce the tenor of Lily’s thoughts accurately. But what about me? If she is my creation and Voldemort is merely using her, can I trust myself to discern that?*

“You never really understood me,” Lily said quietly, breaking into his thoughts. “Nor I you, not until years too late, but that’s beside the point now. What matters is the truth. You want it, I want you to have it, so come and get it.”

*And there is my answer. I can fool myself only so long as I remain a willing part of the deal, and my willingness is at an end.*

Black eyes sought and held green. Two minds touched, the one opening itself to the other.

*It is time to face facts.*

Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, memories flickered past, remnants of a life too soon ended. Some involved events Severus had known about, while others he never had, but each was imbued with a sense he experienced as a breath of sweet musk and a brush of soft fur.

*I never knew how Lily felt to Legilimency—I did not learn it until after we had parted ways—but this suits her as perfectly as her eyes or hair.*

More than that, every memory he viewed was overlaid and intertwined with peace, a peace that set the seal on the life Lily Evans had lived and marked it as finished without relegating it to unimportance.

*And peace is something I have never known. My inventing it to bestow it upon a false Lily is as impossible as Argus Filch becoming Headmaster in my place.*

His legs began to tremble as the meaning of this became clear to him.

*She is not a fantasy.*

*She is real.*

*Neither delusion nor torture but the true Lily, the only girl I ever loved...*

Small, strong hands closed on his shoulders, controlling his fall so that he ended up on his knees rather than on his face. “You must have known I’d come to you,” her voice whispered, as her arms wrapped around him and drew him close.

“I never dared hope for it,” Severus answered brokenly, feeling his tears soak into her robes. “How could I?”

“Surely you didn’t think I stopped caring about you because we had a fight?”

Startled, Severus pulled away enough to look up at her. “A fight? Is that all it was? After I called you—”

“Hardly the first time I’d heard the word,” Lily interrupted. “Not the last time either.”

“And after I hexed—”

“He deserved it.” Lily spoke in the flat tone of one who would allow no protest to her words, and Severus smiled in spite of himself. “Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. I always liked you better when you weren’t scowling. Here, take this.” She produced a handkerchief and held it out. “I won’t use it for you unless you make me.”

“Thank you for that.” Severus blotted his face and returned the small square of white. “Where are we?”

“You don’t recognize platform nine and three-quarters? I thought you were stabbed in the neck, not hit on the head.”

“I was, but I had no idea that King’s Cross Station was where one went after one had died.” Getting to his feet with Lily’s help, Severus glanced down the empty tracks. “Though I will admit that riding British Rail for eternity seems a fair definition of one popular destination.”

Lily snickered. “I’ll have to remember that next time I’m called for a consult. But as you’ve probably guessed, this isn’t what you’ve always considered the real platform nine and three-quarters. It is *a* real version of that place, and more real in its own way than the one where we boarded seven years’ worth of trains together.”

“Further up and further in,” Severus quoted.

“Exactly.” Lily gave him an approving glance. “But in your case, there’s more of a choice to it than that.”

“I beg your pardon?”

A sigh. “Sev, we need to talk.”

Severus raised an eyebrow. “About?”

“You.” Glancing around, Lily located a bench and led Severus to it, sitting down beside him. “There are a few things I don’t think you’ve admitted to yourself yet, and you need to. It’s why you’re here.”

The other eyebrow joined its friend. “I thought I was here because I was dead.”

“Yes, well...” Lily’s lips twitched. “Let’s save that for a bit later. In the first place, Sev, you’re an incurable romantic. You always have been. I know you don’t want to believe that,” she went on, squeezing his hand to still his protest, “but it’s true. No one but an incurable romantic would believe that he’s loved the same unobtainable woman all his life.”

“I *have* loved you all my life!”

She snatched her hand out of his and slapped him on the back of the head.

Severus yelped before he could stop himself. “What was that for?” he demanded.

“For having either a rotten definition of love or a very poor idea of me!”

“I don’t understand.” Severus rubbed the sore spot on his head and wished he hadn’t sounded so much like a sulky child.

“Love,” Lily said through clenched teeth, “is about caring for someone else before you care about yourself. About doing what they would want, not what you want. Has it ever occurred to you, through all these years you’ve been punishing yourself for getting me killed, to think about what I would have told you to do if I’d had the chance?”

The word “Yes” died unsaid on Severus’ tongue as he remembered a conversation in a rose garden about this very topic.

*And it was only the latest of many.*

*What have I done?*

“You’ve wasted your life.” Lily shook her head, turning to stare into the distance beyond the train tracks. “Hiding in that dungeon, never letting yourself do anything pleasant because you thought

you didn't deserve it... I wanted you to live for me, Sev. Not die for me. Not literally, and not figuratively either."

Severus bowed his head, shame turning his face an unaccustomed red. *Cecy was right. I've been a fool.*

"However." The mischievous smile was dancing on Lily's lips once more as he looked up. "There is one thing you've done of which I wholeheartedly approve. And yes, before you ask, I can read your mind, just a little. Nothing below the surface, though. Now, follow me." She stood up and led the way down the platform, taking Severus' hand in hers again. "And don't be frightened."

Severus was about to scoff at the notion that he could be frightened by anything now, when between one step and another their surroundings vanished. They floated hand in hand above—

"What do you see?" Lily asked softly.

"I see..." Severus looked from place to place in awe. "I see the world."

"Yes, you do." Lily made a motion with her free hand. "And now?"

The panorama before Severus' eyes blurred, then settled into a new configuration. "Worlds," he breathed, stretching out a hand as though to touch them. "Hundreds of them. Thousands."

"Possibly even millions. I've never counted." Lily gestured again, and the worlds seemed to thin, though they lost none of their richness and complexity. "Now?"

"They all touch. Like the pages of a book, the book of the universe." Severus was vaguely aware that he was talking in bad poetry, but he thought he might be excused based on the situation. "Is this what the afterlife is? Watching worlds?"

"In a way. But that's not important now. What is important is that all these worlds are real. They aren't all real in the same place, obviously, but they are all real. Do you understand?"

Severus nodded. "I think so."

"Good. Then we can get to the point of all this." A third wave of Lily's hand created a broad, rose-colored ribbon above the "book" of worlds, which slipped between the pages like a two-ended bookmark. "Once upon a time there was a wise man who wanted to help a friend, but he knew the friend would reject any usual sort of help. So he went looking for an unusual sort of help, and he found it in another world, far away."

"He connected the worlds somehow?" Severus hazarded.

"He did, though not physically. That takes an incredible amount of magic to pull off. No, he created a connection that required only a mind and a soul to pass over it, and so his friend was helped by someone from a far-distant world. So distant, in fact, that she had no direct counterpart in the friend's own world, and thus the friend was under the impression that she did not really

exist.” Lily chuckled under her breath. “He always was a hard one to get an idea through to.”

Severus turned to look straight at Lily, noticing with the rim of his eye that they had returned to platform nine and three-quarters. “Tell me this is only a story,” he said, unsure even in his own mind whether the words were a command or a plea.

“Oh, Severus.” Lily laid her free hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you want her to be real?”

Y— “No!” Severus snapped, overriding his own mind’s treachery. “I love you !”

Lily shook her head. “No,” she said in her turn. “You don’t. Not the way you always thought you did.”

*This is not how this meeting was supposed to go.* “That’s impossible! I have never stopped loving you—”

“But it was never the kind of love you wanted it to be,” Lily broke in. “You were young, you didn’t have anyone else to love, I can see why you got confused. But we never would have worked out, Sev, not like that. We made wonderful friends, but we weren’t intended for lovers. And you and Cecilia are.”

“I—she—” A new line of argument occurred to Severus. “If I have never loved you, how do you explain this?” he asked, freeing his hand in order to draw his wand. “*Expecto patronum!*” The silver doe leapt free and galloped down the platform, pausing for an instant to look back at them before she vanished.

“Because that’s not who I am.” Lily sighed. “You never could get over seeing me through James, could you? Especially not after we died together. You didn’t blame him for my death, you knew who to blame for that, but you blamed him for being the one who got to go with me, while you were left behind.”

“Yes,” Severus admitted. “I did.”

“So that’s where your Patronus came from at first. My doe to James’ stag. But if you’d kept me, the real me, in your heart all these years, I think it would have looked a bit more like...” Lily blew into the air between them. “This.”

Severus stared, fascinated, at a man who bore his face and his lineaments but was not him, walking beside a shimmering ward with a great silver tigress pacing beside him. *Strength, tenacity, and fierceness, especially when defending her offspring... it fits better than I want to acknowledge. But truthfulness is the order of the day here.*

“That may well be,” he said, looking up. “But then who...”

Lily snapped her fingers, and the scene changed. A doe with pale brown fur ran swiftly through a wood, her hooves throwing up small puffs of dust wherever they landed. She leaped a brook, stopped, reared, and changed into—

“What point is there in telling me this now?” Severus asked, unable to take his eyes away from the slender blonde woman where she leaned against a tree, laughing. “What good can it do?”

*Now that I am dead?*

“Well, that requires a bit more backtracking.” Lily flicked her hand at the picture, which vanished. “You must have noticed how oddly Draco Malfoy was acting back there.”

“Oddly.” Severus snorted. “That is one way to put it. Without rhyme or reason would be another.”

“No, just without any reason you could have understood until now. He was trying to save you, Severus.”

“Save me? Lily, he had me *killed!* ”

“Yes, he did.” Lily nodded matter-of-factly. “But that was going to happen anyway, as soon as Voldemort got it into his head that you were the reason the Elder Wand wouldn’t work the way he wanted it to. You’re not, you never were, but that didn’t stop Draco from using that idea for his own ends.” For an instant, her face was bleak. “Sev, I swear, if I’d known you’d experience what happened, I’d have come sooner than I did, but I never thought you would still be aware...”

“What happened?” Severus asked blankly. “Do you mean—”

“When you felt as though you were being trapped. You were. Your soul, at least, and your mind, and they’re what count, wouldn’t you say?”

Severus was not attending to this. “So *he* was the one.”

“Let me finish before you start plotting terrible fates for him.” Lily shoved his shoulder affectionately. “First answer my question. Do you agree with me that the mind and soul are the parts of a person that matter? That the body is ultimately a secondary concern?”

“Can I do otherwise, with the evidence all around me?”

Lily smirked. “Good. Now, can you say, ‘I don’t want to go on the cart’?”

Nonplussed, Severus frowned. “I could, but why?”

“Because it’s entirely appropriate.” Lily pressed his hand. “Severus, you’re not dead.”

## Be Careful 107: How Your Story Ends

“My Lord... my Lord...”

*That tone is going to cause me nightmares if nothing else from tonight does.* Draco kept his distance from the cluster of Death Eaters around Voldemort, making sure none of the disgust he felt at his aunt’s adoring voice showed on his face. *Was she really upset about Aunt Andromeda getting rid of her husband, or was it just the surprise of finding out he’s gone, and she’ll be happy tomorrow because it means she can spend more time on the real love of her life?*

From the corner of his eye, he glanced at Harry. The Gryffindor lay where the Killing Curse had thrown him, seemingly motionless, but Draco focused his gaze on a twig just above Harry’s shoulder and was rewarded after a few seconds by seeing it occluded by a swell of black robe.

*It worked just like Abby said it would. They both went down, and they both lived.* One hand crept inside his own robes to touch the red velvet bag. *Sorry for doubting you, sweetie. I never will again, I promise.*

“My Lord...”

“That will do,” said Voldemort. Draco wondered if he was imagining the overtones of uncertainty in the voice. Certainly he wasn’t making up the aggravation.

*Having six Death Eaters fussing over you must be uncomfortable even when they’re your Death Eaters.*

“My Lord, let me—”

“I do not require assistance.” Voldemort got to his feet unaided, glancing around the clearing as though to orient himself, then turning his attention to Harry’s crumpled figure. “The boy... is he dead?”

*Well, that’s the sixty-four-thousand-Galleon question, now isn’t it?*

Planting his feet for courage, Draco called up every memory he had of his godsisters, in class, on stage, anywhere that correct answers and performance were the order of the day. The look Neenie and Abby shared at these moments was a refinement of his own world’s Hermione and her frantic handraising, a puppy-hopeful eagerness to shine restrained by a thin coating of polite behavior.

With any luck, it would convey to Voldemort that the best person available to investigate Harry Potter and his degree of current vitality was—

“Draco,” said Voldemort, pointing the Elder Wand at him.

*Yes!* The rush of glee at the success of his disassembling needed no disguise. “My lord?”

“Examine him.” The wand’s tip twitched towards Harry. “Tell me whether he is dead.”

“Yes, my lord!” Beaming broadly at having been given such an important task, Draco turned and marched with proud precision to Harry’s side. On the way, he caught Lucius’ eye and winked at him. Lucius glared back impotently.

*Try and stop what’s coming, Father. I dare you.*

He knelt beside Harry, made a show of checking his pulse (strong) and his eyes (focusing normally), then leaned down as though to listen for breathing. “Your sister’s a Slytherin, Potter,” he whispered without moving his lips.

Harry’s right hand, shielded by the combined bulk of their two bodies, flipped up a single finger in response.

Draco laughed aloud and jumped to his feet. “Dead, my lord!” he proclaimed in a tone meant to carry. “As dead as his own mummy and daddy!”

*Who, where I’m off to, are very much alive.*

The Death Eaters burst into celebration, which Draco joined wholeheartedly, taking an instant to toss a mild “don’t notice” spell over Harry. It would keep anyone from looking too closely at the supposed corpse.

*No sense in spoiling the moment for them. They’ll know what’s going on soon enough.*

Backing into the trees a short way while Voldemort threw Cruciatuses at Harry—*very brave, my lord, attacking a dead body*—Draco reviewed what was going to happen next. The Death Eaters would head for the castle now, so that Voldemort could trumpet his triumph to the forces of good still within Hogwarts’ walls. The forces of good, seeing their hero seemingly dead, would get angry and attempt to kick Voldemort’s snaky arse. At some point, Harry would reveal that he was not dead and actually kick Voldemort’s snaky arse.

*And all I need to do before that is find Luna and make our last jump together. Seems simple enough, but there’s many a glitch between hand and Snitch. I’d better stay alert.*

Hagrid, sobbing profusely, was lifting Harry from the ground. Draco crossed his fingers that Harry had enough sense to keep still. If he moved too soon, everything would be ruined.

*What am I worrying about? He can play dead through three Cruciatuses, he’s not going to break*

*cover for a few tears. Off to the castle, and may the best side win.*

Thoughts of Luna, of Mum, of Abby and Moony and Danger, kept Draco's feet light and his heart pumping fast as the Death Eaters left the Forest, whooping in glee and shouting insults at the centaurs when they came in sight. The advent of the dementors sent his hand to his wand, but none approached him more closely than he thought he could deal with, though they did remind him that there was still another world that needed saving.

*And for that one, I've not got instructions like I did for this. There's the prophecy, but those things are famous for being interpretable only in hindsight. I just wish I didn't have the feeling I'm forgetting something important about it...*

At last they were standing in front of the castle, Voldemort summoning the defenders out to see what had become of their champion. Draco winced away from McGonagall's scream, peering into the crowd to see if he could locate Luna, when another voice pierced his defenses and brought his gaze around to its owner. Hair even more chaotic than usual, eyes wide in horror and disbelief, Hermione stood dead center on the castle steps.

*Damn it, I forgot she wouldn't know! And if she sees me—*

As though she had heard his thought, Hermione's attention swiveled away from Harry and onto Draco. He could see her shoulders coming up, her mouth opening, her hand rising to point at him.

*She'll give me away. She thinks I let Harry die—I did, but it wasn't how she thinks—and she'll give me away to get back at me for it—unless I can find a way to tell her—*

“Listen to them crying over Potter,” Draco said loudly, giving Hermione a fractional headshake. “Talk about diminishing Gryffindor glory!”

Hermione froze in place. Draco could almost see her mind working. *Those words, they sound familiar. I've heard them before. Recently. The charm, the one Luna used—“he's telling a terrible story, but it doesn't diminish his glory”—wait, a terrible story—is he trying to say—*

Without speaking, Draco glanced up into the sky, feeling Hermione's eyes following his. The moon still hung over the Forest, and he looked at it for a slow count of two, then brought his head back down. *Is Luna all right?* he was asking.

Slowly, Hermione nodded. *She's fine.*

Draco grinned at her. *Take your own answer. Pronoun reversed, obviously.*

Hermione's eyes narrowed. Faster than Draco had ever seen her move, she flashed all her fingers at him, then held up three. *Are you trying to tell me this is a Rule Thirteen? That he never checked Harry's body or—* She inhaled suddenly and flicked her index finger out towards him. *You did it! You did it and you lied!*

It was Draco's turn to nod. *Got it in one.*

With a second scream, Hermione fell to her knees. The expression on her face would have looked like grief to anyone else, but Draco knew she was probably the happiest person on the castle grounds right now.

*Second-happiest if you count my former master, but I don't think he ever knew how to be really happy. So she still wins.*

There was a scuffle at the front of the crowd, and Neville shot out, charging at Voldemort. Draco groaned under his breath as Voldemort Disarmed the younger wizard with an insultingly lazy flick of his wand, then tossed Neville's wand aside with a laugh. It landed near Draco's feet, and he scooped it up before anyone else could, taking advantage of his momentary hiddenness to scowl in Neville's direction. *Merlin's farts, Longbottom, I thought you had more sense than this...*

"But you are a pureblood, aren't you, my brave boy?" Voldemort asked Neville as Neville got back to his feet.

Draco snorted a laugh before Neville could answer. "Some pureblood," he said, shoving the elder Goyle out of the way to come to the front of the crowd. "I could beat him with one hand tied behind my back!" He held up his left arm, letting the sleeve fall back to reveal his bandaged stump. "Or otherwise incapacitated." A glance back at Voldemort. "My lord? May I?"

Voldemort smiled. "What an intriguing idea. The purest blood of Slytherin House against the purest of Gryffindor. Yes, Draco, show us how well you fight for my great ancestor's banner."

"Right away, my lord!" Draco flipped Neville's wand back to him and drew his own. "Scared, Longbottom?" he taunted.

"You wish." Neville wiped a trickle of blood away from his mouth with his off hand. "Answer me one question, Malfoy."

"Anything you like." They were circling each other, wands up, Draco coming around to face Voldemort and the Death Eaters, Neville the Order and the DA. "Within reason."

"Is Harry really dead?"

Draco laughed openly, remembering a conversation held in the Room of Requirement the night before. "As dead as my dear mum, he is!"

Neville's lips twitched. "That's what I thought." His wand jabbed suddenly forward. "*Expelliarmus!*"

The spell caught Draco unprepared. He staggered backwards, his wand torn from his hand, watching Neville spin around to face Voldemort once more. "Dumbledore's Army!" the Gryffindor screamed. "CHARGE!"

Hands snatched at Draco as the defenders of Hogwarts dashed forward. He tried to fight them at first, but they seemed interested more in shoving him to one side of the crowd than in harming

him, and he caught glimpses of his handlers' faces as he spun past them—Hannah Abbott, Michael Corner, Dean Thomas, Cho Chang, all sparing an instant to smile at him and push him further out of harm's way—

“Take my hand!” a girl's voice cried over the roar of the battle, and Draco reached out and caught the offered appendage, pulling himself out onto the fringe of the fight with it. He got his breath back and looked up.

“Wasn't that the other way 'round?” he commented.

Hermione grimaced at the pun. “You're sure you don't need it?” she asked.

“Positive. I've got another one at home, ready to put on. Mum had it made up last week.”

“Good.” Hermione hesitated an instant, then flung herself at him, hugging him tightly. After an initial second of startlement, Draco did the same. It felt like the right thing to do for the last time he would ever see her.

When they pulled away again, Hermione's eyes were damp. “Take care of Luna,” she said. “Make sure she doesn't get lost searching for Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.”

“I will. And you, do the same for...” Draco jerked his chin back at the main body of battlers, shutting his eyes for a second to rid himself of a suspicious stinging therein. “That lot. Don't let any of them *actually* get killed.”

Hermione laughed. “I won't. Well... goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

One last smile, and Hermione plunged back into the thick of the fight. Draco, wandless once again, kept to the edge, craning his neck to see if he could get a glimpse of Luna. The press of bodies forced him into the entrance hall just ahead of the centaurs—he dodged as the door to the kitchens crashed to the floor, and Hogwarts' full contingent of house-elves charged out, Dobby and Kreacher in the lead—a surprisingly solid piece of air nearly knocked him over, but he regained his footing in time to duck into the Great Hall—

*There!*

Luna was battling his mad aunt, Ginny and Hermione by her side. Across the Hall, Voldemort dueled with McGonagall, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Slughorn all at once, but Draco barely noticed this except for a private gratification that his opportunistic Head of House had some personal courage after all. As he began to force his way through the crowd towards the magical catfight, Ginny dodged a Killing Curse by an inch—

“NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!” howled Molly Weasley, throwing her cloak to the floor as she charged at Aunt Bella. “OUT OF MY WAY!”

Ginny ran for the far side of the impromptu dueling ground, Luna and Hermione for the near. Draco hissed in triumph and shoved Goyle aside, putting in an elbow to the nose while he was at it. Two more people and he'd be at Luna's side—one more—

Anthony Goldstein, standing beside Hermione, stumbled and fell, and Lucius appeared in his place, murder in his eyes, his hands reaching for Hermione's neck.

*Oh no you don't.*

Draco dived at his father, knocking him away from Hermione. They went down together, rolling over and over as people backed away, each grappling for a hold on the other. Aunt Bella's insane laughter, Mrs. Weasley's bellowed spell, Voldemort's scream of rage, all blurred together in Draco's ears, and then Lucius caught his left arm at the elbow and twisted it up behind his back, and he screamed himself in pain.

"Here, my lord!" Lucius shouted, dragging Draco to his feet by his stump and the right shoulder of his robes. "Here is the traitor who lied to you about Potter! Kill him and we can still win!"

Like magic the floor cleared between the two Malfoys and the Master one of them served and the other no longer did. Voldemort, his face contorted in fury, brought the Elder Wand up to the ready. Draco started to struggle once more, then froze as a little girl's frantic voice echoed up out of his memory.

*"Draco, don't move, don't move! You have to promise, you have to swear you won't move! The last day... the last minute... you have to promise, Draco..."*

*I promised. I swore I wouldn't move.*

*And Abby's never been wrong before.*

Draco lifted his chin and glared into Voldemort's red eyes. *Go ahead and try it, you bastard*, he thought deliberately. *I'm not afraid of you anymore.*

A flash of green light—several voices shouting at once—a sense of confused motion, and something heavy slamming into his chest—

Then nothing.

## **Be Careful**

### **108: Where Your Destiny Leads**

Severus stared at Lily, momentarily lost for words. “That’s impossible,” were the first ones to return to him. “I felt it happen.”

“Oh, your body died. There’s no doubt about that. But just before it did, Draco used this.” Lily held out her free hand, in which there sparkled a pinch-necked beaker made of dark glass. “They call it a soul flask. It works like the Dementor’s Kiss, drawing the soul out of the body, though it doesn’t do nearly as much damage. To you, it did barely any, because you were almost gone already.”

“Almost gone?” Severus queried. “Not entirely?”

Lily smiled. “Not entirely.” The soul flask disappeared, and she laid her free hand over his. “I know it’s hard to believe, Sev, but if you want to, you can go back.”

“Go back? To a dead body?” Severus shuddered.

“No!” Lily stared at him. “Why would you—oh, good heavens, I never explained!” She laughed ruefully, shaking her head. “Just goes to show I’m not perfect yet. No, there’s a living body ready for you, if you care to take it.” Her wicked smile twisted her lips again. “Somewhat used, but in good condition, and unMarked.” Both pronunciation and the tap of her finger against his left forearm added the capital letter within the word.

Severus scratched absently at the place where his Dark Mark had been. “This sounds like a story I simply must hear.”

“Why not see it instead?” Lily whistled once, and a scene sprang to life beside them, not as large as a Muggle cinema screen but far more detailed and in three dimensions.

Severus watched in silence as the man he had seen a few moments before, the man who was and was not him and whose Patronus was the tiger, deliberately sent that Patronus away from himself to protect two children and a young man from a swarm of dementors. The Kiss, the Warrior Patronus in owl form, and the disappearance of both the other Severus’ soul and the three young people all played out, and the scene itself vanished as the other dementors began to search for their missing prey.

“Do I recognize the eldest of those three?” Severus asked, turning back to Lily.

“You do.”

“So he knows about this.”

“He knows a great deal more than you thought he did.” Lily chuckled. “Didn’t you ever realize what it meant that you saw your Cecilia in his memories?”

“I thought he had invaded my privacy.” Severus ran back over the times he had seen that beloved face inside grey eyes. “But the ways that he saw her, the places and times he remembered her... I should have known this long ago, shouldn’t I?”

“I can’t really blame you because you didn’t. It’s an awfully fantastic jump to make. But now that you’re here, I can tell you that yes, they know each other. She’s actually adopted him.”

Severus nodded. “She told me as much at Christmas, though without a name attached. But how did he ever reach her? How did it begin?”

“The same way it did in your case. Dumbledore had pity on him and gave him a last chance to find the help he needed. Only when he was working on Draco, he was in the last moments of his life, and he was working wandlessly, so he had to use far more magic than he did with you, and that caused an unexpected snag...”

The whole story, told with frequent recourse to the magical cinema, took what would probably have been a few hours in the world’s time to tell. This place, though, admitted of no needs of the body, no hunger or thirst, and Severus listened to the final explanation of what Draco hoped to do tonight as attentively as he had to the first few words of the tale, in which a boy who’d been raised to think weakness a moral failure admitted at the lowest moment of his life that he needed help.

*And so admitting, by Dumbledore’s magic, he was granted an opportunity to find that help. Just as I once was, when I was given a task I thought might be beyond my strength, the task of living on and guarding the son of the man I hated and the woman I loved... He glanced at Lily. Or thought I loved.*

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Lily asked.

“That I found the woman I truly did love in search of the healing I needed to serve the one I never did? It is.” Severus gazed at the screen, which was paused on a picture of Cecilia, asleep in a wing chair, and Draco, stooping to kiss her forehead.

“You could say ‘do,’” suggested Lily softly. “If you mean it.”

Severus smiled, a memory of his own coming to him. “I said it to her once, long ago. With Dumbledore, Minerva, and her husband—a Tom Riddle directed towards good, no less—as witnesses.”

“Do you want that for real?” Lily tapped his elbow, bringing his attention back to her. “The decision’s yours to make, Sev. No one knows better than you do that life can be hard, and that world has as much trouble as the one we were born in. Even love isn’t a guarantee that things will go the way you want them to. If you think you can’t deal with it again, if you’d rather be finished with it all, then you can go that way.” She motioned towards the brick wall that divided platform nine and three-quarters from the Muggle portion of King’s Cross. “But if you’re willing to take the chance...”

A whistle made them both look up. The Hogwarts Express was pulling in.

“Not a very hard decision,” Severus said, standing. “That world never held much for me, except you.” He bent down and kissed Lily on the cheek. “Thank you for what you did give me.”

Smiling, Lily touched the spot where his lips had rested. “And what was that?”

“A reason to believe there was more to life than pain.” Severus crossed the platform in three steps and jumped onto the train as it came to a stop. “And the ability to recognize true love when I found it. Even if it did take me seventeen years.”

“Some lessons are harder to learn than others.” Lily’s eyes were soft and happy, the way Severus had always loved to remember them. “I’m just glad you learned this one in time.”

“So am I.”

The train whistled once more, and the brakes let go. Severus tightened his hold around the bar.

“There’s a Lily there too.” Lily raised her voice to be heard over the sound of the engine straining. “She wants to be friends. Her James doesn’t approve.”

A snicker got away from Severus before he could stop it. “He needs something not to approve,” he shouted back as the Hogwarts Express began to move out. “It’s in his nature.”

His last sight of Lily was of her laughing. “I’ll see you again!” she called between chortles. “Give my love to Cecy!”

Severus waved his hand to tell her he would just before the train rounded the first bend.

Darkness descended, the sense of being cramped returned, but this time he knew it for what it was, a passing phase and not the first seconds of a hellish eternity. *I endured eighteen years of sorrow and loneliness. I can take a few minutes within a flask.*

*Though Draco does deserve some type of revenge for not warning me beforehand.*

He settled down to pass the time by formulating plans that were cruel enough to satisfy his need for vengeance but would neither horrify Cecy overmuch nor leave permanent scars on the boy.

The end came without warning while he was deeply involved in the fourth such plan—a sudden

shock, a sound of shattering glass, and his spirit-self stood in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, the sky above his head brightening with the oncoming dawn.

*I must hurry. If I cannot find the body waiting for me within a few moments, I will die in truth and be forced to choose between moving on and becoming a ghost.*

He hurried towards the side door that hid a shortcut to the fourth floor, which was the last place he had seen the entrance to the hospital wing. Corridors, stairways, rooms blurred together, and within what seemed like seconds, he stood beside a black-haired body on a white-lined bed, watching its chest rise and fall.

*Am I in time? Can I still enter?*

A tentative hand reached out and passed through the hand of the body, with no effect. An arm likewise did nothing. It was only when Severus knelt and merged his chest with that of the body on the bed that he began to feel a gentle pull inward. With a gasp like coming out of the water, he drew himself free, shivering.

*I am in time, but am I sure I want to do this? It is more than a case of dead men's shoes—it is a dead man's body, his entire life. Do I have any right to take what he had no choice about leaving?*

Across the room, someone sighed. Severus turned to see who it was.

One hand bunched around her sheets, a worry-line between her brows, Cecilia Black slept in a bed at the other end of the ward.

*I am being overscrupulous again. My counterpart made his choice when he sent his Patronus away. What happens to his leavings is no longer any concern of his—and I am not sure I would care if it were, since he was foolish enough to overlook this treasure in his very backyard. I have been given a second chance at the life I squandered, and I will be damned if I waste it again.*

He blew a kiss to Cecy, then climbed onto the bed and lay down within the softly breathing body.

For three seconds, nothing happened. Then he began to itch everywhere, but his hand would not respond to his urge to scratch. His limbs felt as heavy as though he had been doused in Swelling Solution, and he seemed to be sinking slowly into too-hot water. His chest squeezed his heart and lungs, his skull pressed down on his brain at all points, his hands and feet twitched wildly as a wave of cold replaced the hot—

Severus Snape opened his eyes. His mouth felt stale and dry, his muscles were stiff, but his body was his own again. The chill which had passed over him still lingered, though, and a rhythmic rasping noise had joined it.

*Chill? Rasping? That sounds like—*

He sat up rapidly, his hand going to his wand pocket. His head spun, but he clutched the frame of the bed with his other hand and willed the dizziness away. There was no time for it, not when a

dementor floated near the end of the hospital wing.

*Why has Cecilia been left here unattended? My own case, or this body's, I can understand—until a few moments ago, there was no soul in it for a dementor to endanger—but what carelessness made them forget about her?*

Whatever the answer to that question, Severus knew it would have no bearing on the dementor's actions. The black-hooded head was turning this way and that, apparently undecided as to which victim it would strike first. It looked somehow puzzled, as though it had known that this room should hold only one soul for its taking and not two.

*This is no time for anthropomorphizing. That is a beast of darkness, nothing more, and it has no business here.* Swallowing to try to bring some moisture to his throat, Severus drew his wand. *I only hope I have the strength to chase it away...*

*“Expecto patronum,”* he whispered harshly.

No silver doe issued from his wand, not even a puff of mist, and now the dementor had made up its mind decisively. It advanced down the ward, passing Cecy's bed without a second look, accelerating towards Severus with its hands already on its tattered hood. Desolation and darkness swept ahead of it, and for one second Severus heard Lily's angry voice, her footsteps moving away from him—

*No. That belongs to another life now. In this world it has no meaning, and no place.*

He released the bedframe and rose to his feet, wand held out in front of him. *“Expecto patronum,”* he said in a firm, clear voice.

The doe leapt forth from his wand's tip and drove her front hooves squarely into the dementor's face. It fell back and fled from the room. Severus' Patronus followed it as far as the door, then stopped to look back at him. “Chase it away,” he told her. “As far as you can, so that it will not return.” She bowed her head and galloped off.

*As for me...* He sat down limply, sliding his wand away more by reflex than by design. *It has been a long day. I believe I need a nap.*

*But if I can, I would like to take care of one piece of business first.*

His legs did not want to support his weight, but he found he could coerce them into doing so by holding onto the ends of the beds as he passed. Moving jerkily, his knees wobbling in a way he would never have permitted if there had been spectators, he made it at last to Cecilia's bedside and looked down at her. The worry-line was gone from her forehead, and she was smiling in her sleep.

“My little love,” he murmured fondly. “My wife that was, and will be again. Take this as a promise of things to come.”

Kneeling down, he laid his head on the pillow beside hers and pressed a kiss to her lips.

The return journey to his own bed was accomplished on all fours, but Severus would not have cared if he had needed to crawl on his belly like a snake. He reached his destination at last, dragged himself up and onto the mattress, and with some degree of malice aforethought arranged his limbs precisely as those of the soulless body had been arranged.

*Not my preferred position in which to sleep, but in this condition I could sleep standing on my head.*

Almost before he could finish the mental sentence, his prophecy came true. His last sensation was that of a tingling wash of energy passing through his body, but since it did not feel harmful he dismissed it.

*Time enough to see what it was when... I... wake...*

Silence fell over the Hogwarts hospital wing, broken only by the sound of two people breathing in perfect harmony.

## Be Careful 109: What You Despair Of

Draco opened his eyes. He was lying on his back on a floor of stone, his arms outstretched and his robes gone. The sky above him was streaked orange and black like a tiger's hide, though the black was maneuvering to cover the orange as he watched.

*Dawn of the dementors.*

He sat up. The Great Hall was empty around him. His left arm was whole once more, though a probing finger found the link between flesh and ferecarne. He wore the same T-shirt and jeans he'd had on under his robes, but the string around his neck held only the velvet bag with the lock of Abby's hair. The soul flask was a shattered memory on the floor beside him.

*I don't think it matters now. Not if that Killing Curse connected, and I can't see how it could have missed. He rubbed the aching spot on his chest. This isn't what I thought the afterlife would be like, but you don't exactly get to pick.*

A glowing sphere on one of the tables caught his eye, and he clambered to his feet, sliding across tabletops and benches to reach it. It was the orb Professor Dumbledore had used on the skyship, a lifetime ago, to create the Patronus fog powered by the singing of the school song. The silver mist within it was swirling in mad patterns, double spirals and miniature whirlwinds forming and falling apart as Draco watched. He sat down and placed his hands on it, as though he were taking his Divination O.W.L. again.

*It may be morbid curiosity, but I still want to know.*

“Show me,” he said. “Show me what's been going on.”

The orb flashed once with light. When it cleared, a familiar and distressed voice was coming out of it. “But we have to go back! We forgot about Aunt Cecy! She's still in the hospital wing where we took her after Draco went away!”

“Abby, you know our being up in the skyships is just a precaution.” Hermione was about to pat her little sister's shoulder, but thought better of it after being treated to a famous Abigail Beauvoi Death Glare. “Aunt Cecy will be safe in the castle as long as the perimeter holds.” *However long that is,* said her face.

“No, she won’t! There are dementors getting in right now!” Abby stamped her foot. “And you don’t believe me, I can see you don’t! If you won’t help Aunt Cecy, I’ll do it myself!”

“I didn’t say I don’t believe you,” Hermione began, but broke off with a scream. “Abby!”

She was too late. Abby had already darted across the tiny room, snatched up one of the emergency broomsticks kept in every room in the skyship, and thrown herself out the window with it.

“Why couldn’t Mum and Dad have waited just six more months to start on Jenny?” Hermione moaned, pulling down a broom for herself and following her sister’s course gingerly as her reflexes attempted to cope with a new center of gravity. Far below, the thin silver line of Patronuses and wards shimmered back and forth, holding firm against the solid black onslaught of dementors.

*For now...* Draco groaned aloud, and the orb flashed again, as though to answer him. When it cleared, a different scene was playing within its depths. He peered at it, seeing only darkness at first, then recognizing a passage below the castle. A withered gray hand wielded a wand, and a one-eyed witch’s hump gaped. Two black-robed forms glided out of it and separated, one moving up the hallway, the other down.

*Abby was right. Of course, when is she not? Except the last time, the one that mattered...*

The orb flashed again. On the perimeter, Ron glanced over at Ray. “You think he’ll come through?”

“He’ll come through,” Ray said confidently.

“Because the prophecy said so?”

“No. Because I know him.”

“Yeah.” Ron turned his eyes skyward, where the ungainly ships hovered over Hogwarts. “Hermione’s out of it, anyway.”

Ray nodded, the thankfulness he would never voice flashing across his features for a split second. Clearly his earlier confidence was more a matter of wishing than fact.

“Less talk, more happiness,” called Professor Riddle’s calm voice from somewhere down the line.

Both boys turned back to their Patronuses, their foreheads wrinkled as they tried to think of good memories they hadn’t yet used.

*Used up would be more like, and they’ll never have a chance to get more...*

The orb flashed. Mum lay in a bed in the hospital wing, the crease between her brows that only appeared when she was thinking or worrying very hard. Down the ward lay the body of Severus Snape, its only movement the automatic rise and fall of the chest. The lamps on the walls were

beginning to dim.

*She's going to be Kissed, and I can't stop it this time. At least his soul got away when the flask broke...*

Flash. Abby stood in a hallway in front of Hermione, the younger witch's hands out in a "Stop where you are" gesture. Hermione had her wand half-raised, but judging by the residue of silver feathers now disintegrating around the fringes of the black robes floating in front of the sisters, her Patronus had been less than effective.

*She can't get any closer, or she risks losing her baby. I don't know if she can cast a Warrior or not, or if it would even do any good...*

Draco wanted to scream, wanted to howl in anger and throw the orb across the Hall. *What was it all for?* he demanded silently, watching Abby watch the dementor. *What was it for, if I was going to die at the last second like this, before I could save the people I love the most, and then have to watch them all go down without even being able to help them?*

"I know what you're feeling," Abby said, her voice shaking, and Draco had the oddest feeling that she was speaking both to the waiting dementor and to him. "I know what you want. You want everyone to feel as afraid and alone as you do. You want the whole world to be dark. But it doesn't have to be that way."

The raspy breathing paused. Then a single word was spoken, malformed and difficult to understand but unmistakably a word.

"Yes..."

"No, it doesn't!" Abby shut her eyes and opened them again. "I can See you," she said. "Both of you. I already knew you were a wise dementor, there's no other way you could speak to me, but now I know for sure. And that means you can't take my soul away, because you have an extra soul already."

"Another..." the dementor breathed.

"I know, there's another one of you here," Abby said with a matter-of-fact nod. "He's not wise. He could take my soul away and make me one of you. But you won't call him, will you?"

"Yes..."

"No, you won't." Abby's face was paler every second, and she reached behind her to clasp Hermione's hand, but her voice stayed steady. "Because I know who you were. One of your souls, anyway. You would have been my godfather if you'd been there when I was born. I know the darkness has had you for a long time and it can make you do mostly what it wants, but I was always taught you were a hero. A hero wouldn't let a dementor take his goddaughter's soul away, no matter how hard he had to fight."

Draco sucked air through his teeth. *Nice try, Abby, but it doesn't work like that...*

*"Expecto patronum emeritum!"* Hermione shouted, and her hawk Patronus streaked free of her wand and attacked the dementor with beak and talons. The dementor tried to defend against the strikes, but its swipes at the bird were feeble, as though it were fighting not only the Warrior but itself. Abby buried her face in Hermione's shoulder, shaking, as silver feathers and black cloth flew.

*It isn't enough. It can't be. Or if it is, it doesn't matter, because the other dementor will come along after taking Mum's soul and hold them both there with their own fear until the perimeter breaks and the next two in line come for them.*

Draco let his hands slip off the orb and put his head down on the table, succumbing to the black despair he'd been trying to avoid with his friends' faces and voices. He'd failed, failed not just a little but completely and irrevocably. His birth world would be saved, but it would have been even if he'd never meddled in its affairs, and this world, the world he loved, was going to drown under a tidal wave of darkness.

*All because I couldn't leave well enough alone. I had to throw that one last log on the fire, telling Father about Hermione. Why did I do it? Why? I knew it would drive him mad, he'd never be able to stand having a Mudblood as his heir, but why couldn't I see it would send him looking for her to kill her?*

A shuddering sob escaped him. *If I'd never said it, I'd have got to Luna while everyone was watching Mrs. Weasley duel Aunt Bella. Luna still had her wand, she could have worked the dream-trance spell in an instant. We'd have been home free, I'd be beating the dementors now, and everything would be all right.*

*Instead it's all wrong, and it can't ever get any better. You don't get a second prophecy if your first one fails, and there wouldn't be anyone left to hear it or carry it out anyway. No one will even come to be with me here, I'll always be alone, because the dementors will keep their souls, and dementors live forever...*

"I'm sorry," he whispered to everyone and no one. "I tried." Another sob closed his throat for a second. "I guess some people aren't meant to be heroes. They're just meant..." He had to swallow hard before he could go on. "They're just meant to die."

*Suppose I might as well see how that happened. I don't remember much of it.*

He pushed himself upright and laid his hands on the orb once more. "Show me," he commanded again. "Show me what went on there. Slowly."

The swirls of mist cleared away to reveal the crowded Great Hall, his father holding tightly to his prosthetic and his robes, Voldemort opening his mouth to speak the Killing Curse. In slow motion, the white lips formed the two words, and as they did, movement started elsewhere in the Hall. At an angle to Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter pulled off his Invisibility Cloak and aimed the wand

he'd won from Draco at the Dark wizard, his own lips moving in a different set of syllables.

*He's trying for a Disarmer. Hoping to save me, maybe, or just taking advantage of Voldemort looking another way. Draco grinned in spite of himself. Very Slytherin of you, Harry. Keep it up.*

Motion near his own figure drew his eye away from the burst of green now gathering at the tip of the Elder Wand. Two individual figures were moving very near him, and a slightly larger group a short distance away.

*What... who is that?*

Fascinated, Draco adjusted his point of view so that he could clearly see the spell each person was casting. Ron, behind him and to the right, had thrown a Cutting Charm—

*And sure enough, there go my robes. A little more to the left would've been better, though, you'd have caught Father's hand then.*

Hermione, on his left, fired a *Relashio* at—

*Why is she aiming that at me? What good's it going to—*

Draco's mouth fell open as his miniature self in the orb staggered sideways, leaving Lucius clutching nothing but a torn set of robes and a hunk of ferecarne.

*She knocked it off me! I remember now, I told her how it worked while we were cementing the blood-bond, what made it stick and what would get it off—*

Lucius was staring dumbfounded at the objects in his hands; he hadn't yet noticed that a Killing Curse was bearing down on him at high velocity. As Draco followed that curse back towards its originator, he saw Harry's Disarmer speeding towards Voldemort's right shoulder, its angle of attack somehow familiar.

*It's the same one he hit me at in the Room of Requirement. The one that threw me back against the wall head-first, hard enough to hurt even with padding. And I said, if it had been a real stone wall —*

A few steps away, Neville and Ginny flung forward the person they were holding between them. It was Luna. She careened across the floor, slammed chest-to-chest with the stumbling Draco, and wrapped her left hand around his right, while her own right hand brought her wand to bear and her lips moved in a sequence Draco found eerily familiar.

*Alucino . The dream-trance spell. Merlin's beard and boots, does that mean—it can't be—*

The Draco and Luna in the orb disappeared. A fraction of a second later, Voldemort's Killing Curse blasted into Lucius' unprotected chest, and an instant after that, the Disarmer Harry had thrown sent Voldemort reeling backwards, his wand flying high in the air. His head hit the wall with a sound like an overripe melon, his neck bent at an angle distinctly unnatural for necks, and

Harry took one step forward and caught the Elder Wand neatly in his palm as it dropped.

Draco lifted his hands from the orb and glared around the Hall. “*Someone*,” he said with all the emphasis he could muster on short notice, “was having me *on*. And when I catch *them*, they are going to catch *it*.” Luna’s distinctive giggle floated back to him, and he grinned. “But first...”

*But first, it’s time to do what I thought I’d failed at doing.*

*And now I finally know how.*

One last time he planted his hands on the orb. “Show me,” he told it. “Show me the dementors.”

Multiple pictures flickered into life. The perimeter, wavering but still holding. The battle in the corridor where Abby and Hermione huddled, almost over by the faintness of Hermione’s hawk. The hospital wing, where a dementor hesitated in the doorway, as though drawn by the scent of food but unwilling to go any farther.

*No problem. None of you are going any farther.*

*Not while I’m here.*

Shutting his eyes, Draco found words for what he had just seen in the orb.

*We made it out. We got away in time. I never have to go back there and pretend to be something I’m not, not ever again.*

*And I’m alive.*

His hands tightened on the orb as the joy of that knowledge flooded through him, shaking him where he sat, rushing in his ears and his veins until he was astounded he was still flesh and blood and bone. It didn’t seem possible for one heart to contain so much.

*I’d better let some of it out, then.*

He took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and lifted his head.

“*Expecto patronum emeritum*,” he said clearly and distinctly.

A pulse of silver light began at the center of the orb and shot outwards, through Draco, through the tables, through the walls. He peered eagerly into the orb and saw it taking effect in the pictures as well. The dementor waiting at the hospital wing door was swept away; the one dropping the last few feathers of Hermione’s Warrior was overwhelmed and collapsed into two shining piles of light; the perimeter was suddenly unnecessary as all the dementors surrounding Hogwarts were shoved back as if by a snowplow, and the individual Patronuses bounded towards the light and joined themselves to it, leaving their creators standing bewildered at the castle’s boundary walls as the glory of the dawn burst over them with the dementors’ darkness gone.

*They'll figure it out soon enough.* Even as the words formed in Draco's mind, Ray bolted for the castle, Ron and Harry on his heels. *I want to see who Abby spotted inside that wise dementor.*

Draco focused his attention on the girls in the hallway, and discovered them both smiling at a small man with a quiet look and a mousy face. "Tell your father I said hi," the not-quite-ghost instructed them, and vanished with a smile of his own. Abby gave a glad little sob and threw her arms around Hermione, who hugged her back fiercely.

*Stupid me. Of course that's who Moony'd have asked if he'd still been around. At least now we know he's free. All the rest of them, too. No more wise dementors, not now, possibly not ever if Auntie Isabelle was the only one who knew how to make them...*

Abby let go of Hermione and took off running down the hall, her face gleeful. Draco spun around, jumped up, and was at the door waiting when she charged through. "Got you!" he shouted, suiting action to word. "Thought you could sneak in on me, did you?"

"Nooooooo—" Abby shrieked with joy as Draco swung her in two complete circles and tossed her onto his shoulder, running down one aisle and up the next with her.

"What are you doing with my sister?" demanded Hermione, arriving breathlessly in the door Abby had used.

"Same thing I'm about to do with you!" Draco pulled her into a bear hug with his free arm. "Celebrating!"

"I like celebrating!" Hermione hugged him back, getting an arm around Abby as well, who was wriggling in uncontrollable happiness. "Let's do it a lot more!"

"Hey!" protested Ray, barreling in through the door from the entrance hall. "That's my sister you're doing things to!"

"And my wife!" added Ron over his shoulder. "I should be the one doing things to her!"

"Come join the party, then!" Hermione caroled. "Plenty for everyone!"

Ron made an outrageously worried face. "I don't like the way that sounds..."

Hermione bounced down the hall and shut Ron's mouth for him as Ray ran up to engulf Draco in a back-slapping hug and spin Abby around a few times himself.

"Way to leave it till the last second, Malfoy," said Harry, dodging around the Weasley clench in the doorway.

"You should talk!"

After that, individual memories refused to form in Draco's mind. More and more people poured in from the perimeter and the now docked skyships, and all of them wanted to see him, touch him,

tell him how wonderful what he'd done was, but he kept looking around for the one person he wanted most to see, the one who didn't come...

At last she came, and the crowd quieted and parted to let her through, and Draco Malfoy closed his arms around Cecilia Black. "I did it, Mum," he whispered into her ear. "I won."

"I never doubted you would," she told him.

In that moment he knew that she never had, and that he had not failed because it was unthinkable that her faith should be misplaced. "We did it," he corrected himself. "Together."

"So we did." Mum smiled up at him. "So we did." She rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "I love you so much."

"I know." Draco drew her close once more. "That's the only reason I made it through."

Locked in their embrace, mother and son stood silent in the center of their world. Soon they would look outward, seek others to join in their happiness and make it greater, but for this moment, they were sufficient unto themselves, and life was very good.

## Be Careful

### 110: What Dreams May Come

Lucius picked himself up off the floor painfully. He felt as though he ought to know what had happened to him, but somehow he did not.

“You’ve been paid your wages,” said a familiar voice from the shadows of the indistinct space around him. “Exactly what you deserved for the work you did.”

“Narcissa?” Lucius stared as his wife stepped into the light, smiling coolly at him. “But you... I...” His chest tightened in panic. “I had no choice,” he said, backing away from her. “You made me think you wanted—you led me to believe—don’t touch me! Stay back!”

“Calm yourself, Lucius.” Narcissa drew out a chair from a table, neither of which had been there a moment before. “I’m not here to hurt you.” Her smile chilled several more degrees, striking ice into his bones. “You’ll do that without any need of my help.”

“Narcissa, what is going on?” Lucius demanded.

“What do you think?” Narcissa laughed. “You’re *dead*, husband mine. And our son is alive, and likely to be so for a long time yet.” Her sidelong glare sent Lucius several steps back. “No thanks to you.”

“You have no idea what he put me through,” snapped Lucius, shoving the question of life and death to the back of his mind for the moment. “No idea how he has ruined our House and our bloodline, how he has trampled on everything we ever tried to teach him—”

“I have a better idea than you might think,” Narcissa cut him off. “And having seen the results, I say good for him! Our way led to destruction, and his... well, see for yourself.”

At a clap of her hands, a shadow turned to light, and the light into discernable figures. Six young adults were laughing and dodging the growling lunges of a six-year-old boy, who paused every few moments to snort very realistic-looking fire from his nostrils. Harry Potter and his Weasley girl spun apart deftly, a boy with a look of the Granger Mudblood about him jumped clear over the child’s head, two near-identical versions of Luna Lovegood wove around each other as though they were playing a shell game, and—

“You see?” Narcissa said in a tone surprisingly satisfied for a mother watching the wreck of her

life's work, as Draco caught the little boy around the waist, lifting him high and twirling him around so that the fire made a complete circle above their heads. "He is alive, which we are not. He is free, which we would not be, were we alive. And he is happy, which we have never been and did not know how to be. Though I like to think I am learning."

"Happiness. Pfeh." Lucius turned away from the pictured scene. "There is more to life than happiness."

"Really?" Narcissa widened her eyes innocently. "When you find out what that 'more' is, do tell me. I will be glad to hear it."

Lucius glowered at her. "Oh, be quiet. And make whatever-that-is go away." He flapped a hand at Draco and his friends, who were now playing keep-away with the child. "It offends me."

"I'm afraid you must get used to being offended, then." Narcissa leaned back in her chair, her tones honey-sweet. "Since this is what we two will be doing for the next few hundred years."

"What?"

"It was so decided." Blowing once on her fingernails, Narcissa buffed them on her robes. "My sins were considered severe enough to warrant your continued company, and yours severe enough to warrant mine. As for watching Draco live his life, and his descendants after him, that is what we make of it. To me, it will be a pleasure. To you..." She snickered. "I cannot know for certain, but I can guess."

"Why, you..." Lucius stalked towards his wife, only to be caught mid-step by what felt like a net woven of air. Shove as he might, he could not get closer to her than two paces away.

"Physical harm to one another is prohibited here." Narcissa was still inspecting her nails. "As it is to oneself, should you think of that. Here, have a seat." She beckoned, and a second chair scooted out of the shadows and impacted with Lucius' legs, dropping him backwards into it. "For what small good I did in my lifetime, I have received one final boon."

Lucius struggled upright in the chair. "What might that be?"

Narcissa snapped her fingers. Lucius cringed slightly, looking around for the effect. When ten seconds went by with no change in their surroundings, he laughed contemptuously. "Is that the best you can do?" he asked.

Except that he did not. No sound escaped his lips, either laughter or words. His mouth moved, his throat vibrated, but a Silencing Charm could have done the trick no better.

He bristled up and glared at Narcissa, who only chuckled. "I have been wanting to do that for years," she said, stretching luxuriously and shooting him an arch glance. "Why don't you sit back, Lucius? Relax, and enjoy the show? I know I will."

*Of course you will. And I will have to suffer doubly, once from seeing it and once from seeing you*

*enjoy it, through all of eternity...*

---

Severus awakened from a pleasant dream to the golden light of afternoon. His lips felt warm, and three words lingered in his mind for no reason he could recall.

*“In the garden...”*

He sat up, noting with satisfaction that the dizziness was less bothersome this time, and cast a complicated charm over the room that would replay what had happened within its walls in the last few hours. The images thus obtained would be fragmentary and incomplete, but it was the quickest way he knew to be sure he was not deluding himself.

*Nothing... nothing... nothing... ah, there!*

A slender woman in robes of her favorite blue bent over his own recumbent self, joy bestowing radiance upon an already pretty face. She whispered something into his ear, then dropped a kiss onto his lips and hurried from the room. The image shattered before she made it to the door, but Severus didn't care. He had seen enough.

*She was here, she was glad to see me, and she has told me where to meet her.*

He glanced around the hospital wing. If he recalled correctly, there was a bathroom around here somewhere...

---

Thirty minutes, a shower, and a Freshening Charm on his robes later, Severus opened the door to the corridor outside. A shrieking giggle startled him considerably; his hand was on his wand before he realized the source of the sound was nothing more than a toddler who had just rounded the corner and was headed straight for him. Severus was not usually good at telling the difference between male and female children, but this little boy had made the job easier by removing all obstacles between his skin and the outside world.

*Apart from a few drops of water, that is.*

The boy dashed around Severus and hid behind his legs as a well-known voice split the air. “Paul? Paul, where are you?”

“Are you Paul?” Severus asked the boy, who giggled again and nodded. “Someone is looking for you...”

Minerva McGonagall came around the corner and stopped dead. “Good afternoon, Severus,” she said with what had to be considered admirable composure under the circumstances. “I'm glad to see you... up and about.”

“I prefer it to the alternative myself,” acknowledged Severus.

“Most of us do,” Minerva agreed. “Severus, have you by chance seen a small naked child?”

“You mean this?” Severus drew his robes aside to reveal Paul, who yelped at the sight of Minerva.

“Yes!” Minerva pounced and lifted the boy adeptly into the air. “Apollo Regulus Black, that was very naughty of you. You never run away from Gran when you’re having a bath, do you understand me? Thank you, Severus,” she added over her shoulder. “There are times I think my daughter gave birth to an eel.”

It took all Severus’ self-control to keep from laughing in Minerva’s face, and even at that he had to go back into the hospital wing after she had left to find a pillow with which to smother the sound of his snickers.

*I knew life would be different here. I see now that I have not even begun to imagine the vast array of occurrences covered by those nine letters.*

As he made his way towards the rose garden, Severus kept his eyes open for more differences, both the subtle (a few of the students he recognized wore different House ties than he had expected) and the blatant (he passed a courtyard in which a game of pick-up Quidditch had been organized and spotted Sirius and Regulus Black and James Potter among the players). A holiday atmosphere prevailed over the whole castle, as though everyone present had been under tension which was now relieved.

*Not unlike what must be happening where I came from, if Harry has succeeded.*

On the third floor, Hermione Granger leaned from a window, reaching her hand outside. When she drew it in, a large hawk with red feathers was preening its left wing on her wrist. A soundless explosion, and the youngest Weasley boy stood beside her instead, sliding an arm around her back and patting her slightly curved belly with a fatuous expression before leaning down for a kiss. Severus moved on quickly, unsure if he were going to laugh, be sick, or envy them.

*Which is laughable in and of itself. Why should I envy those children when what I want is waiting for me?*

He sighed, stopping halfway down a corridor to gaze out unseeingly at the grounds. *Because some part of me still does not believe it can be so. Not like this. Not for me. Even after I have seen her face and kissed her lips, after she has returned my kiss and told me where to come to her, I still cannot believe there could be a real woman who would return my love...*

“Don’t make me come down there,” a female voice crooned from above him.

Severus jumped, more literally than he had thought possible—his feet actually left the floor—and spent a few moments looking around, but the corridor was deserted.

*Still, whether I imagined her or not, Lily is right. I know better than to listen to my doubts at this stage.*

Taking a deep breath, he strode onward.

---

“Mum,” said Lyssa in the hallway above the one where Snape had paused. “That wasn’t nice.”

“No, but it was necessary. How is your father’s game coming along?”

“Three goals, two broken noses, and a sprained wrist.”

“Good.”

---

Turning the final corner which led into the courtyard outside the rose garden, Severus stopped. He had seen this scene before, in the last moments before he awakened. Momentarily he wondered if the other watchers of the scene would now see him as well.

*They will, but only as I relate to Draco. He is their primary concern, for whichever reasons seem best to them.*

*And there he is now.*

Severus drew his wand.

The youngest person present, the brown-haired six-year-old, was the first to notice Severus’ appearance, and his immediate response was to stick out his tongue. “Nyah!” he challenged. “You can’t scare me! Dragons aren’t afraid of anything! Except other dragons, but you’re not another dragon, so nyah!”

“Charlie,” said the boy Draco’s age who looked as though he might be the small child’s brother. “That’s enough.”

“I don’t have to listen to you either,” Charlie retorted. “*You’re* not—”

“We’ve been over this, Charlie,” Draco interrupted, sliding between the two Lunas to come to the boy’s side. “You listen to your mum and dad and the other grownups just like you do to me. And that includes Ray and Neenie, because they’re your brother and sister. I know they’re not dragons,” he added at the rebellious look on the boy’s face. “But you have to grow up right while you’re still a human, if you want to be a good dragon when you get old enough. Remember?”

“Yeah.” Charlie scuffed the sole of his shoe against the stone that floored the courtyard a few times. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Give me a hug.” Draco kept his feet admirably, considering the tackle-like properties of the named accolade. “Now, it’s time for dragons and other people to be someplace else.”

Charlie’s brother scooped the little boy off the ground and carried him out of the courtyard, one of

the Lunas amusing the child along the way by pretending to tickle him. Harry Potter, his forehead unscarred, bowed to Severus, then tagged Ginny Weasley on the shoulder and took off running in the other direction. Ginny growled and gave chase, and the other Luna, the one Severus suspected came from his own native world, drifted after them, pausing to drop Severus a curtsy.

“I’m going to marry him next month,” she said. “Don’t do anything that won’t heal before then.”

A fit of choking overtook Draco. Severus took the opportunity to examine him closely as Luna departed.

*Now that I know his entire story, I can say with assurance what I have said once before. I will not be ashamed to claim this boy as a member of my family.*

*But we should establish the order of precedence immediately.*

He waited for Draco to catch his breath, then advanced to within five paces and leveled his wand between the grey eyes. “Give me one reason I shouldn’t.”

Draco shrugged. “It worked.”

Severus considered this. “Fair enough,” he said, sliding his wand away. “Don’t do it again.”

“Yes, sir.” Draco sketched a bow and started after Luna, but paused just before he turned the corner that would have taken him out of Severus’ sight. “Hurt her,” he said conversationally, “and I’ll kill you.”

A smile got onto Severus’ face before he could stop it. “Likewise. Boy .”

Clapping a hand to his chest, Draco overacted a mortal wound, then grinned and ran off the way his friends had gone.

Severus unlatched the gate and entered the rose garden in the sunset light. He had no doubt about which way to turn. A woman was singing nearby.

*Not a perfect voice, but dearer to me than any training could make it.*

*Out of my dreams and into your arms I long to fly;  
I will come as evening comes to woo a waiting sky...*

As he listened to the words, Severus smiled to himself.

*It could have been written for us. Perhaps, in some world, it was.*

The singer sang on.

*Out of my dreams and into the hush of falling shadows,  
When the mist is low and stars are breaking through,*

*Then out of my dreams I'll go...*

He stepped past the last bush as her voice rose to the highest note in the piece.

She stilled, her hand trembling on the stem of a half-open bud.

For five seconds, a minor eternity, neither of them moved.

Then they were in each other's arms, laughing and crying together, breaking off their kisses for a few seconds at a time to wipe away a tear, to whisper a word or two of love, or simply to look at one another.

The old dream was gone forever, and neither of them had a particle of heart left over to mourn for it. Sharing a reality instead would surely bring them some pain, but their joy was all the sweeter for that knowledge.

*Besides, there are some kinds of pain that bring greater joy in their wake.*

*Such as believing one has died and been condemned to eternal torment at the hands of one's wife's son.*

Severus chuckled at the thought and kissed Cecilia once again.

---

They were married after dinner in a brief ceremony in the small room behind the Great Hall. The same three witnesses who had testified to their dream handfasting all those years ago were present, as were Draco and Luna. At Severus' request, Lily Potter also attended. James' friends, tipped off beforehand by Cecilia, dragged him away before he could become unpleasant.

The bride wore her blue robes and her old gardening shoes, carried a bouquet of freshly opened white roses, and sported earrings which appeared at first glance to be radishes but were not. The groom had no special accouterments, but the love and longing in his eyes put all such trappings to shame. It was clear he had been waiting for this day his entire life.

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"I'm afraid," Mrs. Cecilia Snape whispered to her husband as they reached the door of his quarters, her earrings and bouquet having been left behind with their proper owner.

"Of?" Severus asked, unlocking the door with a tap of his wand and opening it.

"When you look at me..." Cecy shook her head, words failing her. "I can't be worth what I see in your eyes, Severus, I just can't be."

Severus laughed and lifted his wife into his arms as though she weighed nothing. "What a strange coincidence," he said, carrying her across the threshold. "I was about to say the same to you."

The door closed softly behind them, obeying the sign someone had stenciled in bright green across its bottom panel:

*DO NOT DISTURB*

## Be Careful 111: You Just Might Get It

“If one more person says, ‘You’re here too?’ I’m going to scream. Obviously we’re all here, or we wouldn’t be here!”

“Your brilliance never ceases to amaze me,” said Ron, kissing Hermione’s cheek.

“She’s got a point, Ron.” Ginny looked around at the people who’d come, as requested by owl, to Conference Room Jarvey at the Ministry of Magic at eleven o’clock sharp on this, the third day of June. “Does anyone have any idea why we’re all here?”

Harry shook his head, though he was sure Ginny knew this already, and watched the motion go around the table, passing through Neville, Tonks, Lupin, and Andromeda before returning to Ron and Hermione. Teddy, cradled in a sling across Tonks’ chest, gurgled as if to say he didn’t know either.

“Thank you for that edifying comment,” Lupin said to his son, then looked up as the door of the room opened. “Good morning, Minister.”

“Forget how to say Kingsley, Remus?” The Minister of Magic shut the door behind himself and took one of the empty chairs. “Good morning, all. Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“What are we here for?” Harry asked, noticing the scroll in Kingsley’s hand. “Some kind of reading?”

“Yes.” Kingsley set the scroll down on the table. “To be precise, a will reading.”

Baffled glances were exchanged. “Who’s died that would leave all of us something?” Ginny asked.

Kingsley unrolled the top of the scroll. “*The Last Will and Testament of Draco Lucius Malfoy...*”

“*What?*” shouted at least four people. The noise startled Teddy, who began to fuss, and Lupin had to conjure him a cuddly red lion before he would settle down.

“I’m not taking it,” Ron said, shaking his head. “Whatever it is. Probably all jinxed, that’s just what he’d think was funny.”

“You might be embarrassed if I held you to that,” Kingsley said with a faint smile. “Your brother Bill was on the team I sent to investigate the bequests listed here and make sure they were safe, or could be made that way. He doesn’t yet know you’re involved, but he did tell me that whoever was inheriting what he checked out was a ‘very lucky bastard.’ Direct quote, that is.”

Ginny snickered behind her hand.

“If we’re all ready, then.” Kingsley unwound the scroll several inches. “It’s written in a rather informal style, but it’s still legal. It’s not prescient, though, in case you might wonder; with the war going on, Malfoy couldn’t be sure which of his relatives he’d outlive, so he had several conditional clauses set up to cover all eventualities. We’ve located the pieces that apply to the current situation and put them together for today.”

He found his place and began.

*“I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, of sound mind and body, do hereby declare, etcetera, etcetera. Greetings from beyond what I hope is not actually my grave. If, in accordance with my wishes, you’re reading this thirty-one days after the date of my unexplained disappearance, it probably isn’t. I do, however, wish to be considered legally dead from this date and my effects distributed as though I had died, since it’s unlikely I’ll be back.”*

*“The story of where I am and what happened to me will be told elsewhere, but one cautionary note is in order. I can see what’s going on with you lot where I am—it’s likely that I’m watching you right now with some friends and a bowl of popcorn—and if anyone starts making a fuss about accepting one of my bequests, my godmother will give you bad dreams every night until you stop.”*

“Effective,” Tonks murmured.

Kingsley chuckled. “Indeed. *To my aunt, Andromeda Black Tonks, an amount in gold from the Malfoy vault at Gringotts equal to the dowry my mother Narcissa brought with her when she married, to restore a long-standing inequality. My love and my mother’s go with it, along with my wish that I could have known my aunt better. I will miss her.*”

“As I will him,” said Andromeda, smiling at a vision only she could see.

*“To my colleague, Neville Francis Longbottom, all estates formerly belonging to anyone surnamed Lestranger,”* Kingsley went on, ignoring Neville’s pop-eyed look of disbelief. *“It can never make up for what they took away from him, but it will give him a place to start building his own life. I understand Hufflepuff girls like blokes with huge... tracts of land.”*

Neville turned beet red as the rest of the table exploded in laughter.

“Is that pause written in there?” Lupin asked when anything could be heard.

“It is.” Kingsley turned the scroll so Lupin could see. “Why do you ask?”

“Marveling at the universality of things, that’s all.”

“Marvel away. You’re next up.” Kingsley adjusted his place in the scroll. “*To my former professor, Remus John Lupin, my cousin, Nymphadora Tonks Lupin, and their son, Theodore Remus Lupin, the contents, in equal shares, of the Lestrangle vault at Gringotts. Fair warning, the items contained therein are under some nasty anti-theft curses, but the goblins should be able to help you get those off. There’s also a fake sword of Gryffindor and a fake cup of Hufflepuff; everything else, as far as I know, is real.*”

“Are you positive this is legally binding?” Lupin asked in a stunned voice after several seconds of silence. “There has to be another heir somewhere...”

“Rodolphus and Rabastan were the last of the Lestranges,” said Kingsley, setting the scroll down to sketch a family tree in midair with his wand’s tip. “Bellatrix outlived them—only by an hour or two, but that’s enough—and Draco is the closest relative able to inherit on her death, since I believe you were legally disowned, Andromeda?”

Andromeda nodded. “My family wanted to be sure I would never have their money, even after they had no further need of it.”

“See how well that worked,” Ron muttered, drawing scattered chuckles.

Lupin ran a hand across his face, as though hoping to wake himself up. “There must be someone else. I can’t possibly take this.”

“Oh yes you can,” Tonks said firmly, capturing Lupin’s hand between her own. “And you will. Teddy keeps us up enough at nights as it is—I’m not dealing with you having nightmares just because you’re too damn proud to accept someone’s doing you a good turn for once!”

Lupin quirked an eyebrow at her. “Is this the point where I say, ‘Yes, dear?’”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, then. Yes, dear.”

“Finished?” Kingsley inquired.

“We’re done,” said Tonks, letting go of Lupin’s hand to rearrange Teddy and his lion so that one was distinguishable from the other.

“Thank you.” Unrolling the scroll once more, Kingsley continued. “*To my cousins, Ronald Bilius and Ginevra Molly Weasley, and to my...*” He looked up at Hermione. “I won’t lie, this one had us all stumped.”

Hermione covered a giggle. “Something about my being his sister?” she asked.

“Complete with quotation marks.”

“It’s part of the story he told to get us safely out of Malfoy Manor the night we were caught.”

Hermione's smile made Harry wonder. Surely Malfoy Manor couldn't be a good memory for her? "Calling me his sister turned into an inside joke between us. It isn't a problem, is it?"

"It could have been, but he also listed you by full name, so it's not. Ahem. ...*and to my 'sister,' Hermione Jean Granger, the contents, in equal shares, of the Malfoy vault at Gringotts. Fewer interesting artifacts than the Lestranges managed to accumulate, but more gold, even after Aunt Andromeda's share comes out. Also to Ron Weasley, the land on which Malfoy Manor once stood, with the proviso that whatever he does with it make no use of my name whatsoever. Close your mouth, Weasley, you're attracting flies.*"

Ron sat bolt upright as the girls all laughed. "That is *not* written in there!"

Kingsley held up the scroll. Ron wilted. "Oh. It is."

Harry wasn't sure how much longer he could keep from laughing himself. Malfoy might have chosen good over evil, but that clearly hadn't changed his desire to take the mickey out of his old adversaries.

*And I'm the only one left... wonder what he's got for me?*

"*To my friendly enemy, Harry James Potter...*" Kingsley paused to allow the snickering to die down. "*...no gold, not because I don't like him, but because it sets a bad precedent to will money to a person who has a habit of beating one in duels.*" The reaction to this was rather more than snickering. "*Instead, I'd like him to have the journal I've been keeping for the past year, complete with illustrations by my own lovely Luna, with the understanding that he will share the story contained therein with everyone who was involved and, at his own discretion, with the world, by publishing it. There are a few things I think the wizarding world ought to know about.*"

"So *that's* what he meant," Neville said in a tone of sudden understanding. "Back at Hogwarts," he explained when everyone looked at him. "The night before the battle, I'd asked him about something that didn't make sense, and he said he couldn't tell me just then but I'd know eventually. He must've meant his journal."

"Do you have it?" Harry asked Kingsley.

"Right here." Reaching into his pocket, Kingsley extracted a miniature box with a lid, which he set in the middle of the table and tapped with his wand. Ron jumped and Tonks muttered something which earned her a smack from her mother as the box grew to its full size, fifteen inches long and six inches wide and deep. "Shall I finish?"

"There's more?"

"Just one paragraph."

"Please, go on," said Andromeda. "I doubt anyone objects."

"All right." Kingsley folded back the bottom of the scroll. "*Most of all, I'd like to leave everyone*

*my apologies for the stupid things I used to do. I won't say I didn't know better, because I was old enough to think for myself, which means I should have known better. In any case, I've made up for as much of the damage I did as I possibly could. The rest is up to you. I don't expect I'll see you again, so please accept my wishes (and Luna's, of course) for your future health, wealth, and happiness. Mine, by the time you're reading this, will already be a sure thing."*

Silence fell as Kingsley stopped reading. Finally Harry stood up and reached for the box. "Can we come to your house?" he asked Andromeda.

"Of course."

The words slowly trickled through to Ron, to Ginny and Hermione, to Tonks and Lupin and Neville. One by one they stood up, pushed in their chairs, and filed out of the room, nodding to Kingsley as they went. They were silent in the lift to the Atrium; once there, Ginny accepted Andromeda's arm for a Side-Along and the rest of the group Disapparated, Harry holding his box tightly.

*Finally, we get some answers.*

Once everyone was comfortably seated, Harry flipped open the box. It was filled with scrolls, a shorter one lying conspicuously on top labeled "Read me first." He picked it up, broke the green wax seal, and began to read aloud.

*"More mornings than not, I wake up, look around me, and wonder how I ended up where I am..."*

---

For the rest of that day and most of the next, the box of scrolls traveled around the room, each person taking it in turn to read a passage aloud. Teddy spent his time alternately napping and squirming happily on the carpet with father or mother sitting beside him. Ginny and Andromeda took turns cooking, and the guest rooms were pressed into service for the intervening night. No one wanted to leave until the story was finished.

"It's like we never really knew him," said Neville musingly late on the afternoon of the fourth, after the final scroll had been read.

"He never knew himself until this happened," Lupin said. "He used other people's definitions of himself all his life, until they turned into something he could no longer stomach. I've seen that before, but usually the results are far less pretty than this."

"I want to know about that prophecy," said Harry. "It makes less sense than mine, and I didn't think that was possible."

Hermione scoffed. "That's easy. Give it here."

Ron rummaged through the box of scrolls and tossed one towards her. She caught it and unrolled it to the right place. "The beginning is just establishing when it's going to happen. *When darkness*

*shall be master of the night*, when the dementors are everywhere after dark. Everything about *serpent who comes forth* is puns on his name and his parents'. Very bad ones, too."

"No such thing as a good pun," Tonks grumbled.

With a snicker, Hermione went on. "We read about three of the four times he had to despair: the first was before it all started, the second when Lucius made him take the Dreamless Sleep, and the third at Christmas when he thought he and Luna had been caught. I think the fourth one was right after our battle; the last thing he saw before Luna put him into that trance was Voldemort's Killing Curse, and if he hadn't worked out that you saw him as more a friend than an enemy now, Harry, so the Elder Wand wouldn't kill him..."

"You sure about that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry and went on. "Luna probably set it up to make him think he'd died and we'd lost here, so when he learned the truth he'd be happy enough to drive all those dementors away. That's *the darkness shall be struck a blow*. Then the ending is about their getting married—Luna, the moon, is *the argent orb*, and *become forsworn* is a pun on her taking the name Malfoy, 'bad faith'. So the dementors will stay locked up as long as there are Malfoys in that world."

"Another entry on the list of things I never wanted to think about." Ron ground his knuckles into his eyes. "Malfoy's sex life. *Gah*."

Amid the laughter, Harry noticed Ginny beckoning for Hermione to follow her into the other room. He started to get up, but Ginny shook her head at him.

*Girl talk, then. Fine by me.*

---

"You don't like guessing about things," Ginny said when she and Hermione were alone. "But you sound awfully sure about this."

Hermione rubbed her right wrist, smiling. "I am."

"I thought that might be it." Ginny reached out and touched Hermione's hand. "So there's a part of him still here, with you. And they haven't noticed it. None of them."

"You remember how long it took them to spot my teeth, don't you?" Hermione laughed. "I think it bothered them so much to see me without my hand that they're just relieved it's back and blocking out any thoughts of how or why. It could stay that way forever for all I care. What matters is I have it, and it works, and every now and then I just... know things. Not much, but a little."

"A little is all we should need." Ginny frowned. "There was something else, what was it—oh, right. Can I see the prophecy?" She accepted the scroll from Hermione and scrutinized it. "I

thought it sounded short. You missed a line.”

“I skipped a line,” Hermione corrected. “We’ll go back to it some other time, but they’ve heard all they want to hear about Snape today.”

“You’re right. But what’s this about *life with no sight* ? He’s not going to be blind, is he?”

Hermione giggled. “Do you know what ‘Cecilia’ means?”

Ginny sighed. “Someday I’m going to meet whoever writes prophecies,” she said. “And I’m going to tell her she has a bizarre sense of humor and she’s far too focused on puns.”

“How do you know it’s a she?”

“Would a man write something this complicated?”

“Good point.”

---

The next afternoon, Harry, Ron, and Hermione Apparated onto the estate where the rubble of Malfoy Manor still lay. “What am I supposed to do with this?” Ron complained, kicking a chunk of lacquered wood.

“Build a Quidditch pitch?” Harry suggested.

“That’s crazy. I like it.”

Hermione chuckled to herself and strolled away, knowing she wouldn’t be missed. *The only thing that might distract them from talking about Quidditch would be Voldemort returning, and I’m not sure about that...*

Music caught her ear, a piano introduction. She followed it to see where it was coming from, hardly noticing when the open space around her gave way to paneled walls, until she was peering through the open door of a crowded ballroom and hearing a cultured voice say, “Ladies and gentlemen, the bride and groom’s first dance.”

Hermione pressed her fingers to her mouth for joy as Draco and Luna took their place on the floor, Draco in black, Luna in spotless white.

*They’re married! It must have just happened today!*

The lyrics of the song rang faintly familiar to her as they began.

*I set out on a narrow way*

*Many years ago*

*Hoping I would find true love*

*Along the broken road*

Certainly it was a Muggle composition, not magical. Still, the ideas behind it made it the perfect choice for this moment.

*But I got lost a time or two  
Wiped my brow and kept pushing through  
I couldn't see how every sign  
Pointed straight to you*

*They deserve this. Both of them.*

*That every long-lost dream  
Led me to where you are  
Others who broke my heart  
They were like northern stars  
Pointing me on my way  
Into your loving arms  
This much I know is true  
That God bless the broken road  
That led me straight to you*

Draco drew Luna close and spun her out again. Every touch of hand on hand, every look from eye to eye, proclaimed the hope and faith the newlyweds had in one another, and the love that had bound them long before their wedding vows. The road which had brought them together might have been rocky and hard, but now they had each other to help along the way, and nothing could ever daunt them both for long.

*I hope. But nobody could dance like that together and not trust each other with all their hearts and souls.*

The blurring of her vision forced Hermione to look away from the dancers, changing her focus to the rapt wedding guests as the song moved into its second verse.

*I think about the years I've spent  
Just passing through  
I'd like to have the time I lost  
And give it back to you*

*So these are their friends. They do look like us—Merlin's hair, there's the other me! And she really is—well, good for her, but I'm in no hurry for that.*

*But you just smile and take my hand  
You've been there, you understand  
It's all part of a grander plan  
That is coming true*

She continued scanning the room until she was brought up short by a pair of familiar black eyes.

Severus Snape, his arm around a woman who could only be Draco's mum Cecilia, gave her the faintest of smiles before turning his attention back to the couple on the floor as the chorus repeated.

*I guess he can see me since we come from the same world originally. A gleam of gold on his left hand made Hermione smile. I'll let Harry and Ron work out what happened to him on their own. Then they can do their screaming about mental images somewhere else.*

An impassioned instrumental section gave way to singing once again.

*Now I'm just rolling home  
Into my lover's arms  
This much I know is true  
That God bless the broken road  
That led me straight to you*

Draco leaned down to Luna and kissed her, making their guests cheer wildly and Hermione blink back a tear.

*That God bless the broken road  
That led me straight to you*

“Good luck,” she whispered. “Goodbye.”

As the scene blew away with the final note of the song, she could have sworn she saw Draco wink at her.

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Harry went on to become one of the best Aurors the Office had ever seen, sometimes amusing himself by clerking at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes for an afternoon and denying his identity. Ginny played professional Quidditch for four years, then moved to an administrative position with her team when she became pregnant. She, Harry, and their eventually three children lived at a thoroughly renovated number twelve, Grimmauld Place, with Dobby to do the heavy housework and Kreacher to interfere with him.

Ron invested a large portion of his inherited gold in the British gaming industry. His family called it the stupidest thing he'd ever done until the end of the first year, when they discovered he was making money on the deal. Thereafter it was referred to as the second-smartest move of his life; the smartest, as he admitted himself, was asking Hermione to marry him immediately after she'd opened the letter confirming her start date with the Ministry.

Hermione's wedding present to Ron was to raise enough gold, with the help of Harry, Ginny, and George, to make what he'd once called crazy into reality. Thereafter she split her time between the small house which stood in a corner of the former Malfoy estates, the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the Department of Mysteries, where the Malfoy Papers (as Draco's journal had come to be known) were studied for clues about the mysterious otherworld. Winky the house-elf

found happiness with a new master, mistress, and two children to look after, and almost never punished herself anymore.

Neville wooed and won Hannah Abbott without revealing the existence of his “tracts of land” until after the marriage, just in case. The Leaky Cauldron benefited from their existence, though, as did buyers of produce throughout the wizarding world. The gratitude of Hogwarts students towards their Herbology Professor for making it easier for their mothers to get fresh vegetables in any season was noticeably lacking. Still, thanks to Professor Longbottom’s growing friendship with Professor Lupin and his wife the Auror, no one ever tried anything, and Teddy Lupin and his brother and sister devoted hours of their young lives to successful raids on loosely guarded greenhouses, never seeing the smiles their parents exchanged with Neville behind their backs.

Draco pursued theater as a career, gaining fame for his deadpan delivery of comic lines and his flamboyant portrayal of villains. He and Luna, who joined the Ministry as a professional magical creature rescuer a year after her marriage, moved into Cecilia’s old townhouse in London, where Abby joined them once she had finished school. Since Luna was then coping with an illegally trafficked thestral foal, a husband in the throes of dress rehearsals for *The Mikado*, and a gleefully destructive two-year-old, not to mention the final weeks of her second pregnancy (the girls’ long-ago prediction of four small Malfoys would prove true), she welcomed the help.

Severus made sure that none of his students ever saw him in private moments with his wife or their one child, born after two years of marriage. The façade of the terrifying and all-knowing Potions Master would have been hard to reconcile with some of the phrases he found himself uttering in the capacity of husband and father. He never descended into outright baby talk, but there were moments when he came close. The only two personal remarks he would allow himself to make in class were that a happy marriage was the best beauty potion in the world, and that no one needed recourse to a cauldron to make their dreams come true.

The dementors, after their initial “driving back” and being “struck a blow” on the first of May, had retreated to what was in another world Azkaban Island, where the fifth of June saw them “sealed away,” as their very presence interacting with the joy-fueled magic streaming north from Hogwarts and Fidelus Manor created shields around the island’s perimeter. It was theorized that the reason the dementors could not break these wards as they could others was that the emotions powering them were partly of another world and thus, as Tom Riddle put it with a smile, indigestible. Those dying of incurable diseases or old age often chose to bid their families farewell early and travel to Dementor Isle in company with someone capable of a Warrior Patronus, so that eventually all the captive souls might be freed.

And so, as much as was in their various capacities, they all lived happily ever after.

For certain values of ever.