Title: Lamp in the Cooling Room

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Team: EWE

Prompt: The Lovers

Wordcount: ~9000

Rating: R

Warnings: none

Summary: Draco and Harry become snared in a trap, but they're not alone. Love guides our path for reasons we can't always understand.

Author's Note The Lovers: A card of crossroads, tension, and a decision. Duty or your heart's desire? A test that affects the rest of your life. Endless thanks to my beta readers.

She sings, "Here come I, the death watch beetle. Chewing away at the great cathedral."

He whips around and his funny-looking coat billows open, its perfect pleats separating like one of those Oriental paper fans her mother fancies so much. Rain drops fly from it and splatter over her face. "Be quiet," he hisses, and she recoils. "I can't think with your whinging and snivelling."

He raises a finger in her direction, and it shakes like a divining rod. She nods, bites her bottom lip, and stares at the dried blood caked under his fingernail. Maroon, she thinks. It'd been one of her vocabulary words that week. It means dark, brownish red—like the stain under the man's nail—and also a firework used to warn for danger.

"Just shut your mouth," the man reiterates.

"But I'm cold."

She's complained of it before, but beyond a grunt and a sneer, the man has ignored her. She tugs her parka closed over her Beauty and the Beast t-shirt, then scrunches up her nose when the saturated material squeezes a sprinkle of droplets over her trainers. "I'm wet, too." Her body ripples with a sneeze.

He's rude and unfriendly—the man with the white hair, the long coat, and the stick. She only wanted some flowers. He has an entire garden of them, after all. Full, bright blooms with stalks so thick they braid together in places.

"Suffer," the man says. "That's what you get for trespassing."

She holds her tiny hands out, palms up, purple glitter-varnished nails down. "I didn't know."

"Lying Muggle brat," the man says under his breath. He points his stick at her, and she cringes, because it looks a bit like the switch her father uses when she needs punishing.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

The stick wavers, and the man drops it again with a muttered, "Fuck," then sticks it between his teeth and runs his hands through his hair. She struggles not to giggle at the naughty word.

Instead, under her breath she sings, "Gnawing the mediaeval beams. And the magni...cifent carved rood screen."

"Magnificent, you filthy urchin. And where did you learn such a dreadful song?" He circles the

room, not bothering to struggle with the door. He cut his hand the last time he tried.

"From my mum."

Raindrop waterfalls spill down the outside of the window panes. The man's footsteps falter, and he stops and ties to squint through the fogged glass. "Just shut up," he says, a whisper this time.

"Are you a ghost?"

The man spins and blinks at her. "What?"

"You're so white. Are you a spirit?"

"No."

"So you're an alien?"

"An alien?"

"You beamed in. Like from outer space. But no lights." Only a sound, like a giant bursting bubble. She sucks her thumb into her mouth. The pull of cool, rain-wrinkled skin against her tongue soothes. She knows six-year-olds aren't supposed to act like babies, but even the Belle on her shirt is crying. Rainwater has seeped under the decal and peeled it back into dozens of tiny curls. Belle's yellow gown is in tatters. Her arms stretch for the Beast.

The man rolls his eyes. He taps his stick on the door, and the tip glows, but only for a moment. She pulls her thumb out with a pop. "Why don't we beam out?"

"I've tried," he snarls.

"Is your transporter broken?"

In answer, the man points his stick at a window and shouts something. The glass barely rattles in its frame. Not hard enough to knock the dust loose, at any rate. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"We'd better call Scotty," she says.

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There's another pop, and a second alien appears.

"Potter," the mean man spits. His voice his half hate, half relief.

"Malfoy. I should have known."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I shouldn't be surprised that the surge of Dark magic that shook the foundation at the Ministry this morning came from you." The new alien, Potter, stalks forwards, and points his own stick at Malfoy. "What's going on here? Something evil, I'm sure."

Malfoy smoothes his hair back. "Oh, indeed. I was in the middle of my very evil breakfast when this Muggle wandered onto my property and triggered the wards."

"Your property?" Potter turns in a circle, smirking at the neglect and ruin. "Fallen on hard times since I last saw you?" he asks with a laugh.

"Fuck you."

"I was picking flowers," she offers.

Potter notices her for the first time. His eyes widen, and he fumbles his stick back into his coat. "Hello, there. Are you okay?"

"Yes, thank you," she says, wondering if the aliens understand good manners. She takes a deep breath because telling the truth is scary. But owning up to your mistakes is what grown-ups do. "But it's not Malfoy's fault. He's telling the truth about that. It's mine."

Malfoy smirks at Potter.

"Your fault?" Potter presses, ignoring Malfoy's gloat.

She nods. "I was picking flowers and it started to rain, so I came inside. Then the door shut and it wouldn't open. Then Malfoy beamed in, and he couldn't get out either. Now you're here."

"And stuck as well," Malfoy taunts him.

Potter frowns, but doesn't look too concerned. "What is this place?"

Malfoy's smirk fades. "Some sort of trap. My father's invention."

Potter's mouth flies open, then shuts just as quickly. He takes a deep breath before speaking. "What do you know about it?"

"It's a test."

"Of what?"

She's shocked to see Malfoy go even paler. His shoulders slump; he shrinks into his coat. "Of everything." He looks to her for the first time since Potter beamed in, then says, "When the door opens, the first one out survives. Everyone else...." He bites down on the rest.

Potter's eyes dart to her. "We'll leave together," he announces.

"Then we'll all die. You can't fool the spell."

She cringes. Potter grinds his teeth. "Leave it to your family to have a death-trap dressed up to look like a playhouse."

She waits for Malfoy to say something mean-spirited, but instead he turns his back on them both. Potter shakes his head, and pats her shoulder. "Don't worry, honey. We'll figure it out."

She smiles up at him. "Live long and prosper."

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"I'm thirsty."

They turn to her as one, perfectly choreographed. Even their coats swing in unison. Malfoy meets her eyes with a sneer, unflinching. Bravado in the face of danger, her father would say. His coping mechanism, her mother would say.

"Don't be scared," she says to Malfoy. His eyes widen a fraction before he stalks away.

She looks to Potter. He's building a smile on his face, but it's taking a while. His mouth is fighting his brain. He's trying to be brave, just like Malfoy.

"I have some water," he says. "But not much. You'll have to make it last."

She nods. "We'll split it."

"No," they say together, and she can't put her finger on who's more surprised—Potter or Malfoy.

"No," Potter says. His fingers try to comb through her hair, but snag on the tangles. "We'll be fine." A small flask appears in his hand, and she can't help her gasp of pleasure. It's silver, engraved with an intricate design.

She accepts it when he crouches next to her and places it in her cupped hands. "Ah, so

beautiful," she whispers. "Is it holy water?"

"Is it"" Potter shifts on his heels, clears his throat. "No. No, it's just plain water. Just drink half for now, okay?"

She traces the embossing with her tip of her little finger. "I promise."

Potter nods and rises. Malfoy meets him halfway across the room. She catches his eye, but he ignores her. Instead, he mumbles to Potter under his breath "How many times will it refill?"

"Three," Potter replies in the barest whisper, but she hears him. Puzzled, she turns the flask over and over in her hands until thirst drives her to uncork it. Ice-cold water meets her tongue and her throat almost closes in shock. But the promise of liquid drives her to swallow four times—four glorious times—before she pulls it from her mouth. She smacks her lips as she replaces the cork. "It's so cold. And sweet. Perfect."

Potter's chapped lips crook into a half-smile. "It's supposed to be."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Three times," Malfoy says, but he's not looking at her and he's not looking at Potter. He's staring at the door. Rain spatters against the window above the transom, like an irregular heartbeat. "Three times," he says again, and that's when she understands. Malfoy's saying a prayer.

"Amen," she says, giving his appeal the proper closing. "Three times, amen."

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The rain magnifies her thirst. She digs her hand into her pocket and rubs her thumb over the engraved flask, but she doesn't take another drink. It's too soon, and she's a good girl.

She studies Potter and Malfoy.

Potter is pacing. He reminds her of the panther at the zoo—sinewy, coiled energy. Back and forth, back and forth, always in a tight circle. Like a caged cat will flick its tail, he's tapping his stick against his palm.

Malfoy is white marble, staring at the rain. His eyes follow individual drops as they roll down the glass, then flick back to the top to watch more make the journey. He's the hawk, she decides. Sharp-eyed patience.

She waits for long minutes and counts the drops with Malfoy. When she reaches two hundred, she asks, "Will you tell me a story?"

Potter's careful steps falter. "What did you say, sweetheart?"

"Will you tell me a story?"

His knuckles turn white on his stick. "Not right now, okay?"

It's dreadfully impolite to ask for something twice, and Potter looks distracted besides. He has

the look her father gets when he's trying to work out a puzzle. It must be a very hard riddle because the skin around Potter's mouth and eyes are splotchy.

She looks at Malfoy instead. Potter sees her attention shift, and he snorts. "His stories will give you nightmares."

Malfoy doesn't deny it. He tears his eyes away from the rain to look at Potter. "We both have some of those, I'd expect. Some old, some new." He shuffles across the floor and lowers himself to sit next to her. "Though I expect Potter's bad ones are mostly old. His life's a bit like a fairytale these days, you see." His eyes drift to the peeling decal on her shirt.

"You don't know anything," Potter says. His voice floats across the room, carried, she thinks, by melancholy rather than anger. He's stopped pacing and found his own window to stare out of, and though this one is large and arched at the top, the rain beating against it is the same.

"What I think you mean to say, Potter, is that I don't feel anything. After all, it's been proven now and again that I do, in fact, know some things. But you'd like to believe that I have no feelings, wouldn't you?"

She tries to speak, and is surprised to find her thumb has found its way back to her mouth. She pops it loose. "He'd never say that. That would be crass. Potter's not crass."

Malfoy draws his knees up and loops his arms around them. The move is so child-like, she giggles.

"I disagree," he says, whispering behind his hand. "I believe crass describes him admirably."

"She doesn't even know what it means," Potter grumbles.

She does, of course, and since amusement is leaking around the edge of Potter's words, she

tells him so. "I do. It was a vocabulary word last week. Crass: without refinement or delicacy." She fingers the water flask in her pocket. "I need to use it in one more sentence today. If you use a word in three sentences, your brain automatically remembers it."

"I'm positive that Potter will give you the additional opportunity," Malfoy says with a smirk.

"Fuck off."

"You see, my dear? You didn't even have to wait out the hour, let alone the day."

"Thank you, Potter." She smiles so he knows she's grateful. "Your language was crass, and now I'll remember it forever."

Malfoy finds this uproariously funny. His head falls back against the wall as he laughs, and he lets all the sound out instead of trying to swallow it back like lots of grown-ups do. It makes her smile even brighter, because as far as she can tell, it's the first time he's been honest since he beamed in. Tummy laughs are hard to fake. She's tried.

Across the room, Potter has his back to them, but his shoulders are shaking. Malfoy watches him, and his own laughter fades. His smile, however, stays. Absently, he reaches to stroke her hair.

She shifts closer to his touch and is reminded all over again of the chill when her damp jeans stretch across her legs. Her shiver is strong enough to shake the last of the stubborn raindrops from her parka, and though Malfoy is closer, it's Potter who comes to her rescue.

"Are you cold?" He glides forward, his long coat swirling around him like one of her mummy's dresses.

"I'm still wet from the rain," she says.

"Ah, poor thing. Here." He slips his hand into his pocket, mumbles something under his breath, and suddenly her clothes are dry and a warm blanket of air settles around her.

"Thank you," she breathes, astonished. She tests the air around her, palms out, and finds where it turns cold again, a few inches away. But in her bubble, she's warm and dry. Her parka is weightless again, the down fill dry and fluffy, and her long hair swings freely over her shoulders. The cold had made her a bit numb, she realises. "Oh," she says and tosses her hair behind her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry neither of us took care of it before."

"That's all right." She casts a glance at Malfoy before leaning toward Potter. With a sly smile, he pushes his glasses up his nose and edges forward to meet her. "I don't think Malfoy knows how to do the warm/dry magic," she whispers in his ear.

Malfoy glares at her, but there's little heat in his stare. The room is so frigid, she's not surprised.

"Perhaps not," Potter agrees with a wink

"It is magic, isn't it?"

Potter crinkles his face and lifts his eyes to Malfoy. "Yes," he says, though he's still staring at Malfoy. "For what it's worth. It's magic."

Malfoy's hand returns to stroke her head. With infinite slowness, she melts into him until she's curled against his side, ruining the pleats in his coat. "Magic," she says, "is the most perfectly wonderful thing! Belle lived in an enchanted castle. The candles talked. And the furniture.

And the cups and plates." She claps her hands together and laughs.

"And did any of those cups or saucers grow insane with power and try to take over the world?" Malfoy asks.

She considers. "No." Her eyes flick to his stick, gripped between his fingers. "Have they been known to do that on your planet?"

Potter laughs, but Malfoy is all business. "Oh, yes," he says. "I'm afraid they have."

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The night watch begins. She hears them in the dark, whispering in soft voices. Soon, they graduate to barks and growls.

"Don't threaten me, Potter."

"Why the fuck not? Am I supposed to trust you?"

"I'm not a monster. I don't want her dead."

"But if it means your life over hers? I bet I know which you'd choose."

Malfoy's a shadow, gliding across the room to his window. It's dark outside, but the rain glows

and illuminates him. His hands are clenched at his sides, shaking. "Think what you like," he says.

"I will, thanks."

"Of course, it would never cross your mind to put yourself before a child." Malfoy sways and grips the sill to steady himself. "So I'll have no reason to be watching for you either, now will I?"

She doesn't understand the inflection in his voice. It's not sarcasm, Daddy's way of talking. Or disinterest, Mummy's way. It's resignation, bitter like lime juice. Potter turns his back, and she knows the conversation is over.

She looks past Malfoy to the glowing curtain of rain and imagines it splashing off her tongue and down her throat.

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She dozes for a while, never falling completely into unconsciousness. She's too thirsty for that. When she accepts that the hazy half-sleep is gone, she sits up. Malfoy is back at his window, and Potter is making a slow circuit of the room. Every so often, he points his stick at the wall, says something, and fireworks shoot out the end. It's on the tip of her tongue to tell him that playing with fire is dangerous.

Her throat feels closed up, stuck together, like she's eaten a whole jar of peanut butter, and she fumbles the flask from her pocket and takes two large gulps. It races through her system like magic, clearing away the fuzziness. She sneaks one more sip before re-corking it carefully. When she looks up again, Malfoy is watching her. Or rather, he's staring at her

pocket where she stuffed the flask. His lips are parted, but when he catches her looking, he presses them shut.

She wishes he'd take some, and considers telling him how just a couple of sips opened her up, made her more alive. But she doesn't want to make anything worse. That's what bad, inconsiderate children do. "Would you like me to tell you a story?" she asks. "I know lots."

Her words hang in the air, weak and trembling, and Malfoy jerks when he hears them. His answer is to curl his hand into a fist and hit his window as hard as he can. Her heart leaps in her chest. He does it again, this time with a grunt, and the glass rattles, but doesn't break. Her breathing starts to hitch, and Potter finally moves, striding forward with stick in hand. "Malfoy," he says, but Malfoy ignores him and hits the glass again, so hard that his hair flies into his face. His cry of pain matches hers of dismay.

She jumps up and wraps her arms around his waist. "Stop! Stop, Malfoy. You're hurting yourself."

They're off-balance when he stumbles backwards, but Potter saves them from crashing to the floor. He doesn't shout or scream like she expects. He doesn't tell Malfoy that having a temper tantrum is unattractive and uncouth. Instead, he takes Malfoy's hand in his and points his stick at it. "Stay still." He mumbles two words and the lines around Malfoy's mouth ease.

"You can tell me a story," Malfoy says as though Potter never spoke. "You can tell me what you were doing wandering alone on private property in the rain." He's angry, cheeks stained maroon. His hand comes to rest on her head, and it isn't gentle.

She keeps her cheek pressed to his stomach. "I was playing, and I saw the cottage. It was so beautiful. Perfect. There was ivy climbing up the side and the prettiest red door. And flowers, so many flowers. I pretended it was the cottage of the seven dwarfs and I was Snow White. I was only going to pick some flowers, but the rain kept getting worse, so I came inside." Malfoy's hand tightens against her skull. "I knocked first," she adds, because she doesn't want Malfoy to think she's an ill-mannered brat.

His hand tightens a bit more, before relaxing and smoothing down her tousled hair. "Where are your parents?" He mumbles it, but she answers anyway.

"Working."

"Don't you have a baby-sitter?"

"No. I don't have anyone."

One of Potter's hands flutters to his temple. "But you do have parents."

"They're very busy people."

Her pronouncement isn't met with the usual nods and sounds of understanding. Malfoy and Potter seem not to breathe, and it scares her. Her thumb creeps toward her mouth.

"Is that a fact?" Malfoy finally remarks, voice hollow.

She freezes, extended thumb just below her chin. "Yes, very busy. And I'm quite difficult."

"Of that I have no doubt."

Potter's breath whooshes from his lungs. She was right; he had been holding it. He turns Malfoy's hand over to inspect the knuckles. "Can you bend them?" His voice is pulled tight, and it twangs like the strings on her daddy's guitar.

"Yes." And then a moment later. "Thank you."

"Do try to stay intact, Malfoy. I'm going to need you."

Malfoy flexes his hand, but when Potter's fingers play over his wrist, pressing, testing, he jerks away, just like Mummy does when she sees a bee in the garden.

Potter watches him walk away. He slips an arm around her slender shoulders. "Your parents love you. I'm sure."

She smiles because he wants her to. "They're very busy people."

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They let her explore, just as long as she doesn't touch anything. The cottage is vacant, no furniture, just water-pocked walls and filthy windows of all shapes and sizes. She trails her fingers along the plaster as she weaves in and out of the few interconnected rooms, following the trail of mullioned panes. Beyond each of them, rain sheets the glass. Her throat spasms at the sight of each miniature waterfall.

When she passes a doorway, she peeks at Potter and Malfoy; they're speaking like friends for once. Their heads are bent close while Potter talks, pleads his case. Malfoy frowns, shakes his head, but when Potter's mouth thins and his posture stiffens, Malfoy's gestures become conciliatory. His hands dance in the air, soothing Potter. Comforted, she turns back to her inspection.

One window, high on a wall in a back room, shows no rain. She peers closer to be sure, then calls to them. In seconds, they're there, one on each side. Malfoy's hand alights on her head

while Potter crouches alongside, knees creaking. "It's not raining here," she says and points to the window.

As one, they watch as pulses of rainbow light begin to hit the glass and bounce off. Potter's smug smile is all for Malfoy. "They're trying to get in. I knew they'd think of something. Hermione won't let me down."

They huddle together, Potter and Malfoy shoulder to shoulder, her in front, until the pulses fade, become irregular, then stop all together. Potter's glasses have fogged, his hands twitch at his sides, but he won't concede the battle. She's the first to give up and leave the room.

Malfoy joins her a few minutes later. He's more upset than Potter, even if he saw the truth first: the transporter still isn't working. Potter has Harmony, and it won't let him down, but Malfoy hasn't said what he has. She taps her finger on his ankle. "This isn't such a bad place," she tells him.

Malfoy stares at her chipped glitter-varnish and her ragged cuticles. He raps her finger with his own. "Oh, I agree. A lovely place to die."

"Malfoy!" Potter has returned, horrified and angry.

"Mummy says it's useless to be afraid of death. It snatches you when you least expect it, and there's nowhere to hide anyway. Death lies in wait for the bad children. It likes to hunt them when the sun is shining."

For an eternity, the popcorn pat of rain is the only sound in the room. Potter is ashen, quivering like a baby bird. Malfoy's jaw works restlessly, like he's chewing on her words. "That's a horrible thing to say to a child," he whispers.

Potter leaps on the opportunity to loose his anger. He rounds on Malfoy. "You just said this was a lovely place to die. Is that any better?"

"I'm not her mother."

"It's okay," she says before they forget their new friendship. She looks to the nearest window. "Today, it's raining."

Her sound sense ends the argument, and she hides her smug smile, a twin of Potter's. With her finger, she draws designs on Malfoy's boot while he watches the rain.

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It's much later when she opens her eyes; the rain's glow is dampened. Potter is restless, turning laps in the room. Malfoy's propped up next to her.

"Is that why you were out playing in the rain?" he asks. Hiding from death? he doesn't ask.

She understands what he means, though. Overly perceptive, Mummy calls it—a disgusting trait in a child. Wary of his reaction, she nods.

He twitches, then doesn't say anything for a long time.

She pokes his ankle. "It's okay. It hasn't stopped raining since we got here." Malfoy looks unconvinced. "Pretty soon, we'll float away, just you and me and Potter. Like Noah's ark."

"That's faulty logic."

She giggles. "I know. Houses don't really float, unless they're magic. I just wanted to make you feel better."

Malfoy watches Potter make perfect circles in the dusty floor. "Why?"

"Because you're sad."

Malfoy snorts. He closes his eyes and pretends to sleep, but she knows he's really awake. You can't trick a trickster. He's good, though. His lips are parted and his breathing deep and even.

When he lets out a sigh and opens his eyes, she grins and points her finger at him. "Caught you."

Malfoy scowls and says, "What I meant was, that's faulty logic about the rain. Death doesn't discriminate because of the weather."

"Malfoy!"

"Shut up, Potter!" He turns back to her. "Do you understand?"

She nods her head, casting a glance at Potter. He's angry, but at least he's not going round and round anymore. "But he has to rest sometime. Death, I mean." She pleads with her eyes. "Right?"

"Why?"

"Because...because...." Tears sting her eyes.

"He doesn't need to rest."

Her world trembles. She looks to Potter for help, but his eyes are faraway and sad. The tears spill down her cheeks, collect on her lips. She licks them away. "Why are you telling me this? Why, Malfoy? Don't you like me anymore?"

Malfoy's fingers tip her chin back. The tears fan out, miss her mouth, and drip down the line of her throat. Still, his grip is warm. Solid and very safe. "I'm doing this," he says, "because no one else is being honest with you."

"Since when is that important to you?" Potter asks.

"You can't face the world if you don't have the facts," Malfoy says, ignoring him. "Not successfully. Don't be afraid of the truth."

She turns away to hide her grief. Malfoy's given her a gift, and she mustn't seem ungrateful, even if it makes her stomach hurt and her heart gallop. She stares at the window—at the gouges and scratches in the sill.

Earlier in the day Potter tried to pry the sash open. He couldn't open the window, but he did hurt his hand. Malfoy delighted in the whole affair. "Maybe next time you'll listen to me," he said while Potter sucked on his bruised knuckles.

The memory fortifies her, and she swipes away the tears. Knowing the facts does help, even if they're scary. That's truth in advertising. Lots of people get advice, but only the wise profit from it. A famous man said that, but he died a long time ago, and she doesn't remember his name.

Malfoy is a good teacher with valuable lessons. She starts to think about death.

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Cat-like, she naps in short spurts, but each time she wakes, the grogginess is harder to shake. The thirst is always there, just like Potter and Malfoy. She's emptied Potter's flask once already, but his magic filled it up again, just like he said it would.

This time when she awakens, Malfoy isn't at the window. Rather, he's holding her in his lap, rocking her, prolonging her languid state. Her dreams, she's noticed, are becoming increasingly odd. This time, she dreamt the cottage was floating on a vast, green sea. The door was locked and the windows wouldn't open. She cried and cried and drank her own tears.

Malfoy's spinning his stick on his fingers. He's down to shirtsleeves and stained black trousers. His beard is beginning to show, despite the light hair. He smells a little bit.

"So," he says, aware that she's no longer sleeping, "what do your parents do, that they're so busy?"

Easy questions for a sluggish mind. Lots of people want to hear about her parents. "They make software."

Malfoy blinks. From nearby, Potter supplies, "For computers," and Malfoy's look of confusion lifts.

"Busy, busy all day long, are they?" he asks, snide and curious in the same breath.

"Very. But I can take care of myself. I have special meals just for me. They go in the microwave." She mimes pushing the buttons. "Two minutes on high, rotate a quarter turn, cook for two additional minutes. She wipes her nose on her sleeve. "Be careful. Contents will be hot."

Potter covers his mouth. His eyes are wide behind his glasses. "They're not bad," she tells him. "You shouldn't judge a book by its cover."

"Charming," Malfoy drawls. "And this software business keeps them so busy that you're left to fend for yourself with these microwave meals how often?"

"I may eat three times a day and have a biscuit at tea."

"You may? Three times a day?"

She nods.

"And a biscuit with tea." He catches Potter's eye. "How humane. And yet they let you run without a lead. Hardly the safest course of action, as circumstances have proven."

"You're being sarcastic."

Malfoy rubs his forehead with a grimace. "Do you even know what that word means?"

"Of course. Characterised by a harsh and bitter irony."

"Do you know what that means?"

"It means you're angry at something I said, but you'd rather make a joke about it than just say you're angry."

There's nothing but the sound of the rain for a long time. Potter busies himself with inspecting the door again. Malfoy watches her with curious eyes—brows furrowed, chin in hand. She fidgets under the scrutiny. "They're not bad. Truly."

Malfoy gives himself a little shake. "I find that I'm quite...appalled by your meals in a box and your self-serving software-making parents." He scratches at the stubble on his chin. "I must be getting old."

"Or growing a heart," Potter chimes in.

"Well, thankfully we don't need rescuing from your predictable behaviour," Malfoy shoots back. "We'd spend the next millennia in here."

She sucks her thumb vigorously while she tries to be overly perceptive. "They're very important people," she says.

"I'm positive they delight in telling you so," Potter spits.

"Careful, Potter, you're projecting."

"I'm projecting?"

Malfoy has no answer for that.

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The second night watch begins. She hears them in the dark.

"How long until the door opens on its own?"

"There were many traps like this one. It's different every time."

"Will it be easier to break the spell then?"

"I don't know." Malfoy's voice growls though his clenched teeth.

"You're not much use to me, then."

She frowns at Potter's cruelty, so unlike him.

"I wouldn't want to shock you too badly," Malfoy says under his breath. He whispers something else, but it's too soft to make out, even when she strains her ears.

Potter must've heard; he's standing quite close. But his answer reveals nothing. "How are you holding up?" he asks, voice gentler than normal.

"Why would you even care?"

Malfoy's trying to grind the conversation to a halt—she knows the signs—but Potter's having none of it. He pushes and pushes. "She's just a child."

"Exactly."

"Would you be able to live with yourself if she died because of you?"

Malfoy's shadow climbs to his feet. "We've both seen death. We've both seen children die."

"She's an innocent," Potter says, louder now since Malfoy is walking away.

Malfoy chooses a wall along the inside of the cottage, away from a window for once. "She could be," he retorts, "a budding psychopath or the next genocidal dictator. You don't know her future."

"You don't believe that. You like her. You don't think I can see?"

Malfoy snorts and pushes off the wall. He paces round the room, following the circles Potter has made in the dust.

"One day she could become a doctor. A great leader," Potter says, pushing, pushing. "A saint."

"A saint," Malfoy grumbles as he circles in the gloom. "Leave it to you to see divinity in a bedraggled child."

"What better place? You tell me."

~~*

In the exact centre of the room, a clear glass carafe materialises and hovers in the air. Poking from its mouth is a piece of rolled paper.

"A message in a bottle," she says.

Potter and Malfoy rush forward just as the paper works itself free. She gasps when it folds in half and begins to speak. "Take a hold, Harry. You too, Malfoy. But be quick. I don't know how long I can keep this rip open. It's barely big enough for the two of you now. Concentrate. Apparate with the Portkey, but let it guide you. You'll need every drop of power you have. Hurry!" The tips of the paper turn downward in a frown.

She wrinkles her nose at it. The note is awfully bossy.

"That's my girl," Potter says with his Cheshire cat grin. "I knew Hermione would come through."

"I take back almost everything I've ever said about her." Malfoy sweeps the worst of the muck from his coat and reaches for the bottle. Potter does the same.

They freeze at the same instant. Their fingers hover, just brushing each other, an inch above the glass. Potter moans, like a bear caught in a trap, and swings his head in a slow arc to look

at her.

Her hands are curled up inside the sleeves of her parka, fingernails pressing deep into tender flesh, but she smiles through the fear. Showing how brave she can be means everything; she won't let Potter and Malfoy down. He who is brave will be free. She learned that last week in History. She lifts her chin. "Can you come back when you fix the transporter?"

Malfoy moves first. He snatches his hand back, like the bottle is on fire. With a cry, he yanks Potter's hand away as well. The bottle wavers in the air and the folded paper pleads with them, shouts, then threatens that this may be their only chance.

Potter retreats one giant step, dragging Malfoy with him.

The bottle tips, falls, and shatters on the floor, throwing shards of glass in every direction. Wisps of pale blue smoke swirl in the air. The paper crumples itself into a petulant ball and drops as well, though its impact isn't nearly as dramatic. It rolls off into a corner.

"They don't know," Potter says. "They don't know she's here." He turns to Malfoy, furious.

"You're assuming Granger is omniscient?"

"Not Hermione!" Potter yells. "Her parents! They haven't even missed her yet."

Malfoy kicks at the glass, sends it scattering. "And this surprises you?"

"It's been two days."

A flush stains her cheeks. "Nobody's perfect," she says. "And they're""

"Very busy, yes, you've said."

She ducks her head. Potter's angry with her, and rightly so. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "You should've beamed out. You should've left when you had the chance."

Potter tugs her against his dirty coat. "No."

"We'll leave together," Malfoy says. He sandwiches her against Potter. His hands squeeze her slender shoulders, and a bolt of energy crackles through her. It stings. She feels like a bumblebee pin cushion. "Ow."

Malfoy sighs. "I'm sorry," he says. But she's pretty sure he's not talking to her.

~~*

Potter checks to see if she's sleeping, and she fools him easily. She watches from behind her stringy, tangled hair as he approaches Malfoy. "So shall we give this a go?"

Malfoy cocks his head.

"Can we be civil to each other?" Potter asks. "And mean it."

"Once more unto the breach?"

"When that door comes open...."

"If it comes open...."

Potter stutters. "Well, it will eventually, won't it?"

"We don't have until eventually, Potter. You and I will last another two days without water, at the most. Even with our magic to fortify us." He runs his fingers through his hair, leaving it mussed and on end. "They may well be opening a tomb when the spell breaks."

She gives a quiet gasp and Potter throws a sharp look in her direction. She keeps her eyes almost closed, but her breath is rushing in and out of her lungs faster than it should.

"Fine." Relentless, Potter follows Malfoy across the room, stalking him. He's a panther again. "Let's talk about what we can control, then. If the door comes open...."

"You're waiting for me to say that I would never sacrifice such an innocent, cherubic little creature by leaving first."

"I'm waiting for something like that." Potter touches him, a hand on his arm, and Malfoy springs away.

"Disappointment is the order of the day, then, I'm afraid," he says over his shoulder.

"I'll kill you first. Before I let you walk through that door before her."

"Yes. I'm aware of that."

"You wouldn't leave without her before." Potter jabs the air with his stick—his exclamation point.

"A momentary lapse of reason. She means nothing to me."

She doesn't believe him. Potter doesn't either if his raspy chuckle is anything to go by. But he doesn't call Malfoy a liar. There's no reason to, really, if everyone knows the truth.

She wishes Malfoy would take his own advice about honesty. A lesson is only useful if you remember it. A moment later he says, "She's quite brilliant, don't you think?" and her frown becomes a grin. From her mouth to God's ear.

"And difficult," Potter says with a smirk. "I think she might have a bit of magic in her, to be honest. Did you feel the sparks when you touched her? Perhaps she'll get a Hogwarts letter someday."

"You're assuming we're not going to die here."

"I've been through worse. I'm not ready to give up. Are you?"

There's a long pause. The air's heavy—with regret, she thinks. Or maybe with despair. It doesn't matter; she knows what Malfoy is thinking. I'll kill you first. Yes.

"Are you giving up, Malfoy?"

Malfoy evades the question. He shrugs. Head down, he begins to travel their well-worn path around the room. "It's hard to cobble together a reason for existing when you spend every

waking hour trying to justify the actions of your youth."

"You're acting like you're a hundred years old."

Malfoy sweeps his coat aside and jabs the end of his stick into his trousers along the small of his back. "I feel like I'm a hundred years old."

"So that's it then? You sit in that mausoleum all day and feel sorry for yourself?"

"I suppose I do quite a bit of the time," Malfoy says. "I'd ask if you think less of me for it, but I suspect I already know the answer." He stops and stares at the floor. "It hasn't been as easy to pick up the pieces as I'd hoped."

Potter's voice thaws slightly. "What about your parents?"

"My father hasn't recognised me for over a year. Azkaban has finally turned him mad. My mother went on holiday to France about six months ago. She was to be gone a week. I haven't heard from her since."

"She wouldn't abandon you."

She nods because Potter seems so very sure.

"No, she wouldn't," Malfoy agrees.

The silence confuses her before she understands. Malfoy's put an elephant in the room.

"I'm sorry," Potter says. "Nobody told me."

"I don't suspect anyone knows. I've made my own enquiries, of course. She went to meet a cousin for dinner one night and never arrived." He glances at her. "The best I can hope for...is that it was over quickly. Some people," he adds in a rough voice, "can't let go of a grudge."

The elephant's back, but she sees it this time. A tear collects in the corner of her eye before slipping down her nose. She says a silent prayer for Malfoy's mother.

"And yourself?" Malfoy asks, too jubilant. "Have the last few years been full of success and satisfaction?"

"Success, yes."

"Aha. I've always thought that Aurors did little more than rescue people from their own stupidity." After a moment, Potter nods, so she does too. Malfoy is very good at being overly perceptive.

"I"" Potter picks a window to call his own and presses a palm to the glass. "Sometimes it feels like I'm experiencing everything through this...haze. Things, people are distorted. They don't add up like they should. I have trouble caring."

She understands. Her eyes fall on the streaked panes above her head. Life is full of dirty windows.

Potter sighs. "I'm not explaining this well."

"You're" Just go ahead."

"No. Maybe some other time."

~~*

They've stopped talking. She shivers because their words heated the air, and now the chill is creeping back. She inches across the boards and finds them sitting six feet apart, Malfoy against the wall, Potter against a doorframe. She goes to her knees between them.

They've stopped talking, but they're still awake.

"I'm cold," she says. At first there's no reaction, then Potter makes a small sound of comfort and coaxes her forward. The floor around him is strange—spongy and tingly. Soft like a mattress. He mumbles a few words against her hair, and she's warm again. She burrows against his side before twisting around to hold out her hand towards Malfoy.

He stares at it a long time. "I'm not cold."

"I know." She beckons with her fingers. "But we shouldn't be alone just now. There's safety in numbers." Feeling a little dizzy, she puts her head on Potter's chest. "Please, Malfoy?" she asks. Her tongue is stuck to the roof of her mouth.

Potter slouches, flips to his side, and spoons up behind her. He swallows twice before he can talk. "Come on," he says.

Malfoy does. Not close, but close enough for her to touch. She leaves a hand on his arm. It's enough. She'll know if he's stolen.

~~*

Malfoy pushes her gently backward. "Stand back, sweetheart."

She does, peeking around his hip at Potter. The rain is gone at the back window again, so Potter is trying his transporter.

His stick slips from his hand twice before Malfoy steps behind him and steadies his arm. Potter takes a huge breath, holds it, then shouts two words at the window. She feels the air dance around her. Dust tornadoes tickle her toes. She sneezes into Malfoy's coat.

Potter slides through Malfoy's arms to the floor, and she follows them down. "Too damn weak," he says. "I can't""

"Don't kill yourself," Malfoy snaps, then joins in when Potter laughs.

"Did it work?" She peers up at the window.

Potter shakes his head. "I don't know. I don't think so."

She crawls closer, getting even more dirty. Potter pulls her into his arms while Malfoy strokes her hair, and she can't make herself care that Harmony let them down. At least they have each other.

"It's okay, they'll get us out." Potter's sleepy voice rumbles above her head.

"How do you know?"

"We're very important people."

~~*

"Did you refill it the third time?" Potter asks her.

"Yes. Yesterday."

Potter shakes it, testing its fullness. "Drink the rest now, it's better to have it too soon than too late."

She pushes it away. "I want you and Malfoy to drink it."

"Drink it," Malfoy growls.

She pushes it away again. "I think you should. You'll think better if you do."

"I'm thinking perfectly," Malfoy says. "More clearly than I have in a long time. Drink it. Potter

and I don't need it as much. You know our magic?"

She nods.

"It helps us. Not a lot, but a little. Enough. Do you understand?"

She nods.

"We're going to try to get out again in a few hours." His voice is thick, and she knows he has the peanut butter tongue. He places the flask at her mouth. "Potter's sure this plan will succeed. You're going to be fine. We're all going to be fine. Now drink."

Malfoy lies better than anybody she's ever met; he has the perfect voice for it. "I wish you were my dad," she says around the mouth of the flask. She wants to cry, but her body won't give up the tears.

Malfoy chokes up. He drops his head and his hair swings in front of his face. His hand shakes the flask. It trembles away from her lips.

"And Potter too," she adds. "Can someone have two dads?"

"Of course," Potter says. "Of course they can." He strokes a hand down Malfoy's back. When Malfoy shudders behind his curtain of hair, Potter does it again. He peels the flask from Malfoy's hand and lifts it to her lips. "Now drink the water."

~~*

It's the third night watch. She hears them in the dark.

"Thinking clearly, are we?" Potter asks.

"I stand by that statement."

She listens to breathless moans and muffled gasps. The rustle and pull of clothing.

"This is mad," Malfoy says, but he's breathing fast and harsh. "The thirst has finally gone to my head. What kind of emergency supplies are you carrying in that fancy Auror kit of yours?"

"It's the sanest thing I've done in years. And it feels overdue, if you must know." She hears the clatter of things spilling onto the floor. "Here, try this," Potter says. "Burn ointment."

"Hardly ideal, but as long as it keeps your hand slick around my cock, I'm not picky."

"Since when?"

Malfoy snorts. "Overdue? Leave it to you to have a timetable for the top ten most unlikely moments in your life."

"I believe this was in the top five." Potter's laugh is so dry, it barely carries across the room.

They speak very little after that, too busy with the rustling. She hears a belt hiss through its loops. Three snaps give way, and one button pops loose to roll across the floor.

"Sorry," Potter pants. "Sorry. I just want""

"It's okay."

She turns her cheek against the wall but won't cover her ears or close her eyes, no matter how sleepy she is. Someone has to keep the night watch; tonight it's her turn.

Potter and Malfoy move together, mere shadows in the corner of her eye.

"Faster," Malfoy groans. "Just a little" Yes. Twist your" Yes."

"Tighter," Potter wheezes. "Tighter, Malfoy. Come on fuck yes like that."

"Oh, God. God."

"Shhh."

It's a race, but she's not sure who wins. They groan and exhale in unison. Potter's sigh stretches out forever. Malfoy's bursts forth in short puffs.

She holds her breath in the long silence, and just as her lungs begin to scream, there's a sound—maybe a sob, maybe just a sharp breath—and she realises....they're kissing. It goes on for a long time. She didn't know you could kiss for so long. She doesn't know anybody who does. Her eyes droop, and to keep awake, she sings under her breath. "Turn down the lamp in the cooling room. There I stand with my little drum. Death. Watch. You are watching death."

"Malfoy. Malfoy."

"I'm sorry, Potter. I'm sorry this happened to you."

She shivers. "Blow out the lamp with your last breath."

It's impossible to keep her eyes open. She waits for the kissing and the whispering to stop, but it doesn't. It's unending, like the rain, and eventually, she falls into a flimsy and troubled sleep.

Later she feels herself lifted, then settled between them. Safe, alive yet not, like Sleeping Beauty in her tower.

~~*

Someone's shaking the house. The windows rattle and dust falls from the beamed ceiling. Their own special rain. She runs to Potter and Malfoy.

"I can feel them pushing from the outside," Potter says. "Something's giving in the barrier." He tries to stand, but his legs shake so much, he barely makes it to his feet before he groans and sinks back to the floor beside Malfoy. They help each other to sit, slumped against the wall under the largest window, Malfoy's head on Potter's shoulder. She climbs over Malfoy's lap and curls up between them. The dust falls into her hair and makes her sneeze.

"Give me my wand."

Malfoy passes Potter's stick to her, and she gives it to Potter as quickly as she can. Hot potato.

Malfoy's stick is lying across his lap. He tries to grab it, but Potter reaches over her to bat his hand away. "Don't. Just...throw what energy you can my way."

Malfoy scratches his cheek against Potter's shoulder in a rough nod. He doesn't speak, but he does curl an arm around her waist and draw her closer. Potter points his stick at the door and speaks. She barely recognises his voice.

The house shakes harder. She turns her face into Malfoy's coat.

Potter says the magic words again, louder, angrier, and the air thumps. She panics as the breath is sucked from her lungs, then pushed back in by some invisible hand. The hair on her arms stands on end.

They all jump when the front door clicks open, creaking in complaint. Even Malfoy gives a start, and his eyes have been closed for hours, though he's not asleep.

The door is open, but the thought of leaving scares her. She snuggles deeper against Potter and Malfoy and sucks her thumb. Their shared dread still hangs in the air, trapped in millions of tiny flying dust particles.

"That's done it then," Potter announces.

"But look," she replies around her thumb. "The rain."

She and Potter look while Malfoy listens. The splatter of rain against the glass is the same as it's always been, steady and relentless.

"Maybe all we've done is sprung the trap early." Malfoy peels his eyes open. His shaking hand pets her hair.

Potter sighs. "I've got nothing left."

"I promise you that's not true," Malfoy replies, "If it means anything at this juncture."

Smirking, Potter tilts his head back. It thunks against the wall, and he stares at the ceiling, blinking the swirling dust from his eyes. He's not wearing his glasses anymore, but she can't remember when he stopped. "It does," he says. "It means something."

It does to her, too.

They watch the door for so long that she dozes off. A tickle under her chin rouses her. "Right, then," Potter says. "Off you go. I'd wager they've got a big glass of water waiting for you."

Oddly, the thought holds no appeal. "Aren't you coming?"

"We'll be along," Potter assures. "You first."

"But""

"No buts," Malfoy says. His eyes are open again, boring into hers. One hand is tangled in her hair, the other is clasped with one of Potter's. "Be a good girl now."

Stubbornly, she holds on. Potter whispers, "It's okay," and peels her fingers off this coat. Malfoy gives a hand from behind while Potter lifts her from their laps. His hand lingers on the

small of her back, then nudges her forward. "Be a good girl. Be strong."

"I don't want to be strong." She's crying without her tears again. "I want to stay with you and Malfoy."

In a daze, Potter shakes his head. "Why?"

"Because you love me."

Malfoy catches her ankle with his fingers and taps twice; their silent signal. "We'll see you soon. Now go. Do as you're told."

It's not fair, and she sobs all the way to the door. Beauty was allowed to stay in her castle forever. Nobody made her leave.

The knob is icy, but she pulls the door wide open before releasing it. Outside there is only rain, hissing against a ground that's shrouded in mist. She looks back once.

Potter has thrown his arm around Malfoy's shoulders, and Malfoy has snuck his around Potter's waist. His lips are moving in a whisper against Potter's throat. Potter's eyes are closed and he's smiling.

She steps outside.

The rain disappears. The sun beats down, blinding her. Voices ring out, an entire crowd of them; some are angry. She's caught up in a blanket, and someone presses a glass of water to her lips. She drinks, but it's not like Potter's water, perfectly sweet and cold. "Where are Potter and Malfoy?" she asks when the glass is taken away.

Then she's picked up, whisked away, and there are more strange voices, more strange faces, more long, pleated coats, and more fancy sticks. She thinks she hears her father's voice. "Where is my daughter? Where is she?"

"What about Potter and Malfoy?" she asks again, but her question is lost. There's a swell of sound from the crowd. Close by, someone begins to clap. She tries to see, but she can't. She's too small, and the sun is blinding her.

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