Draco Malfoy, It's Your Lucky Day

I.

The Opportunity

Small opportunities are often the beginning of great enterprises.

~ Demosthenes

"Does this look blue to you?" Draco asked and cocked his head, staring pensively at his cauldron.

"It looks green," Blaise said, though Draco suspected he didn't even bother to look over.

"It could be blue," Derwent Harper said bracingly. Unlike Blaise, he inspected the potion carefully and Draco found his personal space dangerously invaded; Harper leaned in entirely too close for comfort.

"Yes, it could be." Blaise looked irritated. "But, it's not."

"It looks cyan to me," Draco claimed and looked at Blaise hopefully.

"I believe you." Blaise's big eyes became even larger, giving him a deceptively innocent expression. "I also believe you're colour-blind."

"Yes, it's definitely cyan," Harper exclaimed.

Draco looked sideways at the smiling, round-cheeked boy and scowled. His scowl deepened as he caught sight of Harper's cauldron. His Gregory's Unctuous Unction was the perfect aqua blue.

Bloody youngsters. They were such annoying little suck-ups and such overachievers. The decision to combine the returning seventh-years with the new generation was a complete disaster. The N.E.W.T classrooms were too full and too loud; in the end they would all receive substandard education. The crowded classrooms were one of the reasons Draco couldn't concentrate properly and even his potion work suffered. The other reason was the fact that the majority of the students and professors hated him for escaping Azkaban. Draco would believe himself paranoid, but Malfoys weren't prone to paranoia. Two thirds of the school definitely hated him. Which wouldn't be a problem, except Draco really didn't like the remaining third.

"Slughorn's coming," Blaise mumbled. He sighed and stopped stirring his cauldron. His unction was yellow and looked more like chicken soup than anything. It made Draco feel a little better about his own failure.

Slughorn leaned over Ernie Macmillan's cauldron, nearly knocking over both the cauldron and Ernie with his enormous belly. Seizing the moment while Slughorn was distracted, Draco quickly grabbed his copy of Advanced Potion-Making and scanned the instructions. If he could only figure out what went wrong, then maybe he could at least justify the green colour. That ought to be worth a point or two. The instructions clearly stated that if the unction turned green instead of blue, the drinker wouldn't think that the giver was his or hers best friend as intended, but he would merely find the giver awfully smelly, and that could only happen if the Unction was left to simmer more than five minutes after adding belladonna leaves. Draco frowned. He had been so careful. He clearly remembered adding the leaves and then checking his watch and then . . . Draco's frown deepened. And then Potter had gasped because he had cut his finger while slicing ginger roots. After that, all Draco could remember was how full and red Potter's lips looked around his injured finger as he sucked it, but for the life of him he simply couldn't recall extinguishing the flames beneath his cauldron.

Draco turned toward the end of the classroom to throw a nasty glare at Potter. However, too busy staring at his Unction with a worried frown, Potter didn't notice him. Fucking Potter. It was all his fault, as usual.

"Ah, Mr Zabini!" Slughorn exclaimed.

Draco tensed and slowly dragged his gaze away from Potter's messy hair.

"You should have used fresh belladonna leaves, not dried." Slughorn grimaced. "Well, that was a human mistake. I suppose this is Acceptable." He made a note on his parchment, giving Blaise a fond smile.

Draco's hands clenched into fists. Of course. Members of the Slug Club could get away with yellow.

"Hmm," Slughorn commented as he leaned over Draco's cauldron. Pressing his lips together, Draco braced himself. He knew better than to expect mercy from Slughorn. "Mr Malfoy," Slughorn said sadly and shook his head, his moustache twitching. "I'm afraid you won't be making any new friends any time soon." With that, he scribbled something that looked suspiciously like a T on his parchment.

Theodore Nott turned around to sneer at Draco as someone snickered loudly. The sound came from the Gryffindor side of the classroom, but Draco didn't look around to investigate. He imagined it was Potter.

"Oh, who cares about Slughorn and his grades?" Harper whispered after he had received a smile and an O for his Unction. "You excel at Potions and everyone will know that when you get an E on your N.E.W.T. exam."

Draco's jaw hurt something fierce. He had been gritting his teeth too hard. Slughorn paused at Potter's desk and Draco narrowed his eyes at Potter's faintly embarrassed expression.

"I'll get an O," Draco answered Harper absentmindedly. Draco's hand flew upward to toy with the small pendant that hung on a silver chain around his neck.

"Of course!" Harper said quickly. "That's what I meant!"

Draco ignored him. Potter's fingers were twined into that awful messy hair, toying with the jet-black strands.

"It looks a bit green," Potter mumbled. He eyed his cauldron with his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Nonsense!" Slughorn cried. "It looks cyan to me." He made a note on his parchment. "And that certainly exceeds my expectation, because I can see quite clearly, Mr Potter, that you're in love again. I can always tell." Slughorn tapped his nose.

Potter blinked at him stupidly.

"No, no! Don't even try to deny it," Slughorn argued passionately even though Potter hadn't said a word. "Sadly, Miss Weasley abandoned us for Quidditch, but you have someone else on your mind." Slughorn leaned in closer to Potter, who automatically leaned backwards. "I can see it in your eyes," Slughorn added in a loud whisper. He beamed as a couple of students giggled. Potter dropped his gaze, but remained silent, his cheeks reddening.

"Draco!"

Draco's gaze snapped to Blaise, who was shaking his head at him. "You're growling. Stop it!" Blaise snapped. "Slughorn will never like you. Accept it and let it go."

Draco opened his mouth to inform Blaise he didn't give a flying fuck about Slughorn and that he was more annoyed by Potter's attempts to look coy, but Slughorn's voice boomed through the classroom.

"Settle down! Settle down!" he cried, walking back toward his desk. "I know it's Friday afternoon, but we have five more minutes and I have important news to impart."

Uninterested, Draco sighed and concentrated on meticulously tidying up his workspace. Slughorn continued, sounding unreasonably excited.

"Next week we'll be brewing Memory Potions. I know we said they were highly ineffective and they're unlikely to appear on your N.E.W.T. exams, but there has been a breakthrough recently . . ." Slughorn paused. "Does anyone here read Potions Weekly?"

Draco almost raised his hand, but then he noticed no one — not even Granger — had done so. He crossed his arms on his chest, displeased that he couldn't brag about reading the prestigious magazine. Apparently, the fact would only earn him some odd looks and he had enough of those lately.

He knew exactly what Slughorn was talking about. Merwyn Borage, the most respected living Potion master in Wizarding Britain, discovered that Jobberknoll feathers preserved much more memory magic if soaked in Firewhiskey for twenty-four hours prior to use. The article had made Draco formulate some vague plans of earning a small fortune by brewing and selling the Memory Potion to frantic students during exam weeks. His plan quickly solidified. If they were to brew the potion next week it would be possible he could swipe some from his cauldron unnoticed.

Slughorn was talking again and this time Draco paid closer attention.

"No one?" Slughorn looked disappointed. He glanced at Granger, who seemed to feel guilty upon discovering there were written words in the world she had never read. "Well, never mind, then." Slughorn shrugged sadly. "The point is, I've been told that Memory Potions could indeed come up on your exams. However, I'm afraid we have a small problem. Hogwarts potion supply dangerously lacks Jobberknoll feathers." Slughorn looked inordinately pleased by that fact. It made Draco feel wary. Somehow, it seemed unlikely Slughorn would end his tale with the words, "And so I decided to buy some." Jobberknoll feathers were rare and valuable and Slughorn had already complained more than once about lack of funds. Draco wouldn't be surprised to discover that Slughorn swiped and sold as many potions ingredients as he could from the Hogwarts storeroom. Severus Snape had never complained about a 'dangerous lack' of valuable ingredients.

"Therefore . . ." Slughorn paused dramatically. "Tomorrow afternoon we will head out for a little field trip and gather some Jobberknoll feathers." Several students cried out in joy — Hufflepuffs, no doubt — but most of them looked uncertain. Slughorn continued to smile widely. "But that's not all. I plan to divide you into teams and the team that gathers the most feathers will receive a vial of Memory Potion, guaranteed to enhance your memory for a month." Slughorn gave the whole class a sly look. "It could do wonders for your grades."

"But Professor Slughorn!" Hermione Granger's voice rose above the cheers. "Isn't using Memory Potions for that purpose . . . er, illegal?"

Slughorn stopped smiling and remained silent for nearly a minute. "Nonsense!" he cried eventually. He treated them all to a fairly creepy smile. "However, let us not mention anything about the contest to the Headmistress. We can't have her thinking you're not eager for a little recreation and I had to bribe you." He laughed loudly, but eventually crumbled under Granger's glare and began to inspect his knuckles carefully.

Draco would find it amusing if he didn't have other, more troubling things on his mind.

"And where exactly will we gather these feathers?" he asked loudly.

"Why, the Forbidden Forest, Mr Malfoy. Where else?" Slughorn said in a no-nonsense voice, but the terror on some students' faces forced him to elaborate. "Oh, come now. The Forbidden Forest is not the same dangerous place it once was. The centaurs are being quite friendly and the werewolves . . . Well, those tales were always a lie. The Headmistress has given us her permission as long as we don't go too far and we return before dark."

Draco seethed, but he knew better than to voice his concerns out loud. The centaurs weren't harmless creatures worthy of trust and he knew for a fact that a pack of werewolves was still roaming through the forest. Not to mention that dozens of various dangerous creatures had been spotted there. They were all going to die. His only consolation was that if the werewolves attacked them, they'd go after Slughorn first and would inescapably choke on him.

Draco's classmates, the gullible fools, looked appeased and some of them — Gryffindors, naturally — actually looked excited. Granger, alone, seemed distressed. She moaned into her hands. "Not the woods, again. I'll die of boredom and I planned to study this weekend."

Draco couldn't help sharing her sentiments. Studying seemed like a splendid idea suddenly.

Nott turned to sneer at Draco again. He snapped his jaw and made childish grimaces, undoubtedly trying to imitate a werewolf. Draco scowled at him. Nott was becoming more and more insufferable with every passing day.

The bell rang and the students leapt out of their seats as though burned.

"Wait! Wait!" Slughorn cried over the racket and, defeated, the students sat back down. "A few more things. We'll meet in front of the entrance at noon. Be sharp and dress warmly."

"About that, Professor," Ernie Macmillan said tentatively. "Is it not a bit cold for a field trip? It has been snowing rather fierce."

Slughorn ignored him. "Before I forget," he said, "if you find any unicorn tail hair, bring those to me. And remember, Jobberknolls are protected creatures, you can't kill them and pluck their feathers — that's cheating." Slughorn's expression turned pensive. "Though, I suppose, you could Stun them . . ."

Someone cleared their throat and Slughorn snapped out of his reverie. "Only joking, Miss Granger. Aren't we lucky we have you to remind us all about legalities?" Slughorn gave her a wide toothy smile. "Discarded feathers are our only legal option, I'm afraid. But Jobberknolls nest during winter, so I'm sure we'll gather as much as we need. Perhaps even more."

Brilliant. Draco sighed, hardly able to believe that Slughorn planned to drag them to the Forbidden Forest during winter. It seemed he had carefully planned the trip so he could use the students as a free workforce and earn a few extra Galleons.

Irritated and eager to leave, Draco stood up suddenly. The whole class rose a second later, as though they were just waiting for a trigger. However, it wasn't their lucky day.

"Wait! Wait!" Slughorn raised his hands into the air and the students dropped back into their chairs. "This will take just a moment, I promise. I must divide you into pairs." Slughorn twirled his moustache

and gave them a shrewd look as though pairing up students for a field trip was a special, difficult discipline.

Draco sank deeper into his chair. He knew in advance that the whole thing wouldn't end well.

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"I hate my life," Draco grumbled. He sat on the floor a little farther away from the rest of the students that milled in front of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. The fact that it was their final class of the week was a small comfort considering he had tomorrow's field trip to look forward to. He could think of a hundred more entertaining things to do on a Saturday afternoon than traipsing through a monster-infested forest with his feather-hunting partner. For example, mindlessly staring at the ceiling and decapitating flobberworms sounded much more promising. "I can't believe McGonagall let Slughorn exploit us like this. And what was Slughorn thinking pairing me off with Potter? Is he not afraid I'll sully his little perfect hero with my evil presence?"

Goyle, sitting on Draco's left, made an indistinct grunting sound and Pansy, who was leaning her head on Draco's right shoulder, gave a disinterested shrug.

"Pansy!" Draco snapped.

Pansy's head shot up and she blinked at him owlishly. Her dark eyes looked innocent as she said, "I'm sorry, Draco, was that not a rhetorical rant? I assumed you were talking to yourself. You rarely need any input on the subject of Harry Potter."

Draco scowled. "I was talking about Slughorn, not Potter. And I don't need input, I need sympathy."

"Hmm." Pansy's smile looked all-knowing. "I'm afraid I'm incapable of the latter on Friday afternoons. So, to answer your question, Slughorn paired you off with Potter either because he thinks you two would make a great team . . ." Pansy paused to snicker. "Or because he hopes Potter will stop you from keeping every single Jobberknoll feather and unicorn hair for yourself."

"Of course I'm keeping everything to myself! And Potter won't stop me!" Draco scoffed. "I don't plan to help Slughorn earn so much as a Knut. He can go fuck himself with his contest and his prize and his bloody feathers." Draco glared at the pack of Gryffindors that stood farther down the corridor. Potter laughed merrily at something Weasley said; he was clearly untroubled by tomorrow's outing.

"Stupid Slughorn," Draco fumed. "And stupid Potter. Can you believe my bad luck?"

"Oh yes, it's so hard to be you," a voice sneered.

Surprised, Draco looked up to see Theodore Nott looming over him.

"You lost your right to whine two years ago," Nott spat and turned around with a flourish, moving to stand a few feet away, next to a smiling Derwent Harper.

Draco blinked. "Thank you for that spectacularly random remark, Nott. It has made my day joyous," he deadpanned, before turning toward Pansy. "What's his problem?"

Pansy waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, ignore him — he's just poor," she said in a stage whisper. Nott scowled at her.

"Oh, that's right." Draco grinned gleefully. "I hear you're living with your Squib aunt in a Muggle flat. Is that true, Nott?"

Nott's glare was murderous. He mumbled something, but Draco didn't hear him; his ears were full of Pansy's giggles and Goyle's guffaws. Draco suspected Goyle didn't really know what had been said, but he laughed loyally, nonetheless. Bless him.

"I hear the neighbourhood is so substandard even the Muggles abhor it," Pansy added, not bothering to keep her voice down.

"That's terrible!" Draco gasped, feigning shock. He was well aware of Nott's pathetic situation, but couldn't feel sorry for him. He had never liked Nott. The idiot had always been a creepy loner who did nothing but glare and scowl at other students. He had never even laughed at Draco's jokes. Not to mention that Nott's father was a conniving bastard who constantly tried to turn the Dark Lord against the Malfoys, and Nott's mother was a complete psychopath who could give Draco's aunt a run for the money. And that was saying something.

"You think that's funny, do you?" Nott took a few steps forward and leaned down to whisper, "My family's misfortunes are all your fault. You and your family screwed up and now we all have to put up with that." Nott scowled in Granger's direction. "You're nothing but a traitor."

Blood rushed into Draco's cheeks as he tried to calm himself by listing possible curses he could throw at Nott. Pansy hissed like an angry cat and Goyle flexed his knuckles. Draco grabbed Goyle's forearm. They couldn't risk drawing attention to themselves, not while Nott insisted on discussing such a dangerous topic in public. Several students were already looking their way; Potter among them.

"You have a lot of nerve accusing my family of treason," Draco said, forcing his voice to sound calm and steady. "As I recall, the Dark Lord dealt with your father because he had failed him."

Nott paled and Draco winced. He remembered his father telling him that the Dark Lord cursed the elder Nott with the Entrail-expelling Curse. He had suffered a terrible, gruesome death. Draco almost felt guilty for bringing that up, but his guilt vanished as Nott narrowed his eyes and spat, "Your father, not mine screwed up in the Department of Mysteries. The Dark Lord should have punished him."

"Obviously, that's not what the Dark Lord thought. Isn't doubting his judgement a mark of a traitor?"

Nott's whole face turned red. "You know what the mark of traitors is, Malfoy? Keeping all your assets and escaping persecution during a Death Eater hunt. Tell me, how exactly did that happen?"

Furious, Draco shot up, his hand flying toward his wand.

"Merrythought!" Pansy whispered furiously, standing up.

Draco forced himself to relax his stance and Nott took a hurried step back. Professor Merrythought passed them without a single glance, her nose high in the air. As she unlocked the classroom door, Nott looked like he wanted to say something else, but Pansy grabbed Draco's arm and pulled him forward sharply.

"Don't waste your time on him. He's a bitter idiot," she said under her breath.

"He called me a traitor just because my family was smart enough to keep their heads down and avoid Azkaban," Draco whispered back as he followed Pansy into the classroom.

"Who cares, Draco? The Dark Lord is gone for good, either way. There's no one to betray anymore."

"And that's not my fault; that's all I'm saying," Draco said a bit defensively. Of course, technically, it was. Had he captured Potter that day in the Room of Requirement, had his father managed to keep him in his dungeon, had his mother refused to lie to the Dark Lord in the forest, then the Dark Lord would be alive and Potter would be dead. But Pansy — nor anyone else — needn't know that. Additionally, no one would ever find out that despite his family's ruined reputation and Draco's questionable career options, he preferred the final outcome of the Battle as it was to grovelling in front of a maniac for the rest of his life.

"It's not my fault his mother is a lunatic," Draco continued his defence as they sat down. "She should have realised that yelling, 'The Dark Lord will return and punish you all!' during her trial wouldn't help

her case."

Pansy shushed him and Draco reluctantly focused on their smiling Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Then, remembering he hated her, he sighed and tossed his bag aside.

Professor Eunice Merrythought was a pleasant looking woman in her thirties, whose brown hair was always arranged into an elaborate bun and whose last name was fairly appropriate. Though, Draco preferred to call her Professor Dirtythought in his mind. Despite her acceptable skill in Defence, it was hard to take her seriously. All her virtues could not hide an appalling flaw that, more than once, had made Draco feel like he would lose his lunch right there in the classroom. Eunice Merrythought had no shame, and much to the students' distress. she left no room for doubt of her dirty little crush.

"It's Friday," Professor Merrythought informed them needlessly, "and I know you're eager to stop thinking for the week so I thought we could have some fun and practice our duelling skills." She smiled widely and then directed a soppy sort of look toward the end of the classroom.

"Here we go," Pansy muttered.

"I'm sure that will make you happy, Mr Potter!" Professor Merrythought simpered, batting her long eyelashes. "I know how much you love duelling." To everyone's horror, she threw back her shoulders, exposing her impressive cleavage.

Draco's stomach rolled. He was sure that this time he would throw up. He didn't have to look behind to know Potter probably looked mortified and as red as a tomato, but even the thought of Potter's mortification couldn't lessen the pain of seeing a grow-up woman fawning over their 'young and dashing Saviour' as she liked to call him. By the looks of it, the rest of the students shared Draco's sentiments. Parvati Patil's dark eyes were shooting daggers at Merrythought.

Pansy poked Draco's ribs. "Stop growling and help me move the desk aside," she said, standing up.

Draco stood up reluctantly and sneaked a glance in Potter's direction. His cheeks flaming, Potter looked as though he was trying to hide behind Granger and Weasley as they dragged a desk aside to free the

centre of the classroom for duelling.

"Thanks for your help," Pansy snapped and Draco quickly turned toward her. She was scowling at him and he realised she had already moved the desk by herself. Draco would have been impressed by her strength and agility if he wasn't busy trying to find Merrythought in the commotion so he could glare at her some more.

"If she pairs me off with Potter, I might have to murder someone," he said as Merrythought began shouting names.

"I'll murder someone if I hear the name Potter again," Pansy grumbled, but Draco was barely listening; instead, he wondered whether he would have to stare at Potter for the next hour.

However, Draco needn't have worried. Apparently, it was Professor Merrythought's lucky day, because since Longbottom was in the Hospital Wing, recovering from the flu, their numbers were uneven.

"Oh, Mr Potter," Merrythought cried after she paired off Draco with Ron Weasley. "It seems we'll have to practice together!"

Potter looked like he was being sent to the gallows, but he stood opposite Merrythought without a word.

"Malfoy, you're growling in the wrong direction."

Draco's gaze snapped to his opponent. Ron Weasley grinned at him toothily and twirled his wand, looking confident.

Instead of responding, Draco shot a curse at him. Weasley's eyes widened and he ducked instead of defending himself.

"We're practicing Defence, Weasley," Draco chastised. "Not avoiding it."

Weasley narrowed his eyes and shot a Knee-twisting Curse at Draco's legs. Draco deflected it with ease, but was robbed of his gloating moment of victory when Professor Merrythought cried, "Oh dear, Mr Potter, are you all right?"

Draco's gaze snapped toward Potter just as Potter jumped backwards as though burned. He eyed Merrythought's outstretched hand with trepidation. "No, honestly, Professor, you missed. I'm fine! I'm fine!" he cried and pressed his back to the wall as Merrythought attempted to inspect his chest.

Busy shaking his head disapprovingly, Draco yelped as a spell hit him squarely in the mouth. Furious, he raised his wand to curse Weasley, but his mumbled incantation was ineffective. His upper lip felt heavy under the weight of the quickly-growing blond moustache. Weasley howled with laughter and several students joined him, staring at Draco with tears in their eyes. Draco couldn't blame them for laughing. He must have looked ridiculous. On the bright side, however, Weasley was too busy laughing to even try to defend himself from Draco's non-verbally cast curse.

Draco grinned as Weasley yelped, flailing around madly as his hands turned to jelly. The students around them redirected their laughter at Weasley. Pleased, Draco calmly reached upward and twirled his long moustache evilly.

"Mr Malfoy, Jelly-hands Curse is off limits!" Professor Merrythought yelled over the racket as she hurried toward Weasley.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Professor. I forgot," Draco said unrepentantly.

Merrythought quickly cancelled the curse, but Weasley's left hand was still flapping around uselessly.

"Hmm. Hospital Wing, Mr Weasley. And do come back the moment you feel better."

Weasley left, but not before he scowled at Draco. Grinning, Draco twirled his moustache again, eliciting more laughter from the students around him. Another spell hit him in his mouth and Draco cringed, almost firing a curse at Professor Merrythought. He stopped himself on time, however, realising she had cancelled the hex. His moustache vanished promptly.

Professor Merrythought narrowed his eyes. "Go and duel, Mr Potter. I'm sure he can handle you," she said primly, clearly unhappy she was pulled away from her young and dashing Saviour.

Turning around, Draco rolled his eyes and stomped off toward Potter.

Even though his friend had just been sent to the Hospital Wing, Potter looked relieved. He smiled widely at Draco.

"I loved the moustache. Very fetching."

Draco shot a hex at him.

Potter reacted immediately; he deflected the hex and sent a barrage of jinxes at Draco. Soon, the air around them was filled with multicoloured spells. Draco concentrated on firing curses at Potter's smiling face, determined to win. Potter's confident expression wavered and Draco could smell victory, but in the next moment he nearly dropped his wand as pain shot through his hand.

Smoke and magic around them cleared to display Potter's smug expression. Defeat stinging him more than his hand, Draco rubbed his sore skin and glared.

"A Stinging Hex?" he scoffed. "Really, Potter, is that the best you can do? You didn't even make me bleed. I won't even have a scar." He stared at Potter, increasingly displeased by Potter's guilt-free expression. References to the day Potter had nearly murdered him with the Sectumsempra Curse usually made Potter drop his gaze in distress.

"Malfoy," Potter sighed exasperatedly. "You bring that up every time we duel. It's getting old."

"Is that so? You know what's not getting old, Potter? My scars. You mutilated me. Isn't it nice you're able to forget?" Draco pressed his lips together in anger, though, technically, he was lying. The scars were barely visible. The truth was he could only see them through a magnifying glass. Nonetheless, Potter ought to have felt guilty. Forever.

"I don't believe you," Potter said flatly. "Snape said you wouldn’t have any scarring."

Draco fumed. His hand flew to the top button of his shirt. "You're sure about that? Want to see them?" Draco unfastened the button.

Potter's eyebrows rose. Mouth twitching, he crossed his arms on his chest and cocked his head. "Sure. Go on, then, Malfoy. Take off your shirt."

Fuck. Why did Potter have to be so difficult? Stalling, Draco slowly unfastened the second button, trying to think of a way to avoid taking off his shirt without making it look like he was hiding something. Potter's gaze flickered toward the patch of skin Draco's parted shirt revealed and Draco's fingers shook.

"Mr Potter! Mr Malfoy!" Professor Merrythought cried from the distance. "Stop staring at each other and practice!"

Thanking Merlin for Merrythought's jealousy, Draco abandoned his unwanted task as Potter righted his stance and pointed his wand at him.

Potter was still grinning. "Perhaps you can take off your shirt for me tomorrow in the forest and show me your mutilated chest."

"Oh, don't worry, Potter." Draco gritted his teeth. "I do plan to show you something in the forest

tomorrow."

Potter blinked. "Was that a threat or some sort of innuendo?"

"A threat!" Draco spluttered. "We'll be all alone tomorrow in a big dark forest. A lot could happen, Potter, and there will be no witnesses."

Instead of looking worried, Potter seemed amused. "And again. Was that a threat or —"

"Yes, it was threat! For fuck's sake, what's wrong with you?" Draco all but yelled. Potter's calm demeanour was infuriating. Where was that indignant Gryffindor fury? Steam should have been coming out of Potter's ears by now. "I'd watch my back tomorrow if I were you, Potter. If I have it my way, you won't come out of that forest alive!"

Utter silence greeted his words. Draco winced, realising he had yelled just a bit too loudly and every student had heard him. They stopped casting curses to stare at him.

Shit.

"Mr Malfoy!" Professor Merrythought whispered, sounding stunned, and inexplicably standing right in front of Draco. "What did you just say?"

Draco looked around at the silent students. Fuck fuck fuck. He shouldn't have said that. It occurred to him that at one point, mere months ago, everyone thought Potter had died in the Forbidden Forest. It was a sore subject.

Potter, alone, looked untroubled. "Oh, don't mind him, Professor," he said sweetly. "He just likes the sound of his dangerous, threatening voice. He didn't mean it."

"I meant it!" Draco snapped before he could stop himself.

Professor Merrythought gasped.

Draco glared at Potter, who had the nerve to roll his eyes behind Merrythought's back. And then Potter did the oddest thing: he shook his head furiously and mouthed, "Shut up!"

Perplexed that Potter acted as though he was trying to help him, Draco opened his mouth to snap at him and inform him he didn't need his help, but Professor Merrythought's shocked glare turned murderous. Perhaps it was unwise to threaten her precious Saviour in front of her. She was a Professor and that gave her certain powers.

Swallowing heavily, Draco forced himself to smile. "I was joking."

"Were you?" Merrythought sounded unimpressed. "It wasn't funny. I will speak to Professor Slughorn —"

"He really was joking." Potter cut her off. "He says silly things like that all the time." He smiled beatifically.

Intense hatred washed over Draco, but surprisingly it wasn't directed at Potter, who had just called him silly and dismissed him as a harmless idiot, but at Merrythought, who melted on the spot in the face of Harry Potter's smile.

The classroom door burst open and Weasley stepped inside. Everyone looked at him and he took a wary step back.

"What?" he asked defensively.

Nobody answered him.

Merrythought shot a glare at Draco and said, "Off you go, Mr Malfoy. Your duelling partner has returned."

Potter grimaced as Merrythought took Draco's place, but he managed to smile a little as Draco passed him by. His lips barely moved as he murmured, "Can't wait to see what you'll show me tomorrow, Malfoy."

Blinking rapidly, Draco hurried toward Weasley, shaking his head to get rid of his ridiculous thoughts. If he didn't know better, he'd think Potter was flirting with him.

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Draco stared at the ceiling as he toyed with the silver pendant his mother had given him that summer. Crazy thoughts swirled through his mind. He considered all sorts of things he could do with the pendant; however, his mother, father and he had agreed on when and why Draco would use it. He needed it for his N.E.W.T.s.

Though the Malfoy family fortune was intact, their reputation was ruined. Nott was wrong to envy him. Draco's father had already lost his job at the Ministry and Draco was the only one who could salvage their status. Galleons stashed away in their vault at Gringotts wouldn't last forever. Draco needed a job, a respectable, well-paying job, but no one would hire him unless — maybe — if they decided that his skills were impressive enough that the Death Eater connections could be overlooked. That was why Draco needed to achieve the perfect score. Es and As wouldn't help him, but a shiny row of Outstandings could open doors for him; doors that would remain closed otherwise.

Sure, technically, he planned to cheat, but he suspected that the N.E.W.T. examiners would be as

impartial as Hogwarts Professors were toward a former Death Eater. It was a good plan and more than one person depended on its success, so Draco couldn't understand his irrational desire to open the pendant before the proper time. Like tomorrow, for example.

Potter's odd behaviour had messed with his mind. Potter was probably just taking the piss.

Of course, there were other things he could do tomorrow. He might not need the pendant. He could try to get along with Potter — Potter almost seemed willing. He could gather as many feathers as he could and win the contest. It might make Slughorn like him better. He could use the Memory Potion a month before the exams and avoid the risky cheating business. Use of the Memory Potion was still cheating, but that would have been Slughorn's responsibility, so it was much safer.

That plan seemed smarter at first glance, but Draco knew better than to rely on Slughorn's and Potter's willingness to be nice to him.

Draco scoffed in the darkness and pulled the covers to his chin. It had been frighteningly cold these last few days. If Potter fell down tomorrow and Draco left him to freeze to death, no one could blame him. Draco grinned at the image of Potter shivering on the snowy ground and shouting for help. That would wipe the smug smile from Potter's face. He wouldn't call Draco silly again.

Draco grumbled and fluffed his pillow, sinking deeper beneath the covers. He should stop thinking about Potter; thinking about him before sleep tended to give him odd dreams. Determinedly closing his eyes, Draco cleared his mind and drifted to sleep.

If he dreamed about Potter that night, he did not remember it.

II.

The Decision

The day you decide to do it is your lucky day.

~ Japanese Proverb

When he first woke up, Draco was utterly convinced that someone had Transfigured him into a snail. His cheek was glued to a cold rough surface and something sticky prevented him from opening his eye. Silly thoughts were quickly replaced by a headache and Draco hissed and raised his head, supporting himself with his left elbow. Stinging pain shot through his temple and he closed his eyes to shield them from the bright light that assaulted his vision. However, when he opened his eyes and his vision cleared, he realised it wasn't bright at all. It was dark and cold and though Draco had no idea where the hell he was, he knew he wasn't lying tucked away safely in his warm bed. Instead, he was sprawled on his stomach on top of twigs and rotting leaves.

He looked around and then wished he hadn't. Apparently, he was stuck in one of those nightmares where he was lost in the middle of nowhere and his limbs refused to carry him, even though he knew danger was coming.

A gust of wind sent a few snowflakes into his face and Draco grimaced and wiped his cheek< in the process brushing off a twig that was stuck to his skin. His fingertips touched his temple and Draco winced in pain. His breath misted in front of him as he gasped at the sight of blood on his fingers. Unnerved, he rolled onto his back. His right arm had been stuck beneath him and now it throbbed in protest. Thick tree branches loomed high above his head; they looked bare and threatening, revealing small patches of winter's grey sky and allowing the snow to fall through the gaps. His hands were frozen and numb, but he could feel the fingers of his right hand gripping something thick and solid. With supreme effort, he rose up into a sitting position. His head fell forward as pain in the back of his skull made his eyes water. Brushing away damp hair that had fallen into his eyes, Draco blinked a few times and then focused his gaze on a broken stick he held in a tight grip. Except it wasn't a stick. It was his wand.

Draco's mind cleared in an instant. He wasn't having a nightmare; this was no dream. He could mistake a dream for reality, but mistaking reality for a dream was impossible; perhaps, if he was drunk, he could hope this was a dream, but he had never felt more sober. The coldness of his surroundings and the soreness of his body were too harsh and too real. He was in the middle of the forest, half-frozen, injured

and unarmed. Which was a cold hard fact, even though it made absolutely no sense, since the last thing he remembered was lying in his bed thinking about tomorrow's field trip to the Forbidden Forest. And now he was suddenly there. How was that possible?

Draco looked down at his fur-lined winter cloak, his thick green scarf and his warm boots. His not-yet-fully-formed theory of a possible abduction dissipated. He had definitely lost some time; he couldn't remember getting dressed. It occurred to him he had no gloves, which was odd, because no one sane would go outside without gloves in this weather; however, Draco swiftly found them in his pocket. Shaking his head in disbelief, he tucked his broken wand away and pulled on the gloves.

A single blue feather fell slowly to the ground. Apparently, it had been stuck to his glove. His breathing accelerating, Draco reached into his pocket and found even more bright blue feathers.

He stared at them, sure he had lost his mind. Was it tomorrow? Had they already left for their field trip? But then where were the others? And why couldn't he remember anything?

Draco looked up at the grey sky. It was dark, but it was always dark in the Forbidden Forest and winter days were short. He couldn't tell what time it was but it definitely wasn't noon and it definitely wasn't night; it seemed like the sun was still in the sky, hidden behind the heavy grey clouds. Not particularly hopeful, Draco checked his pockets again to see whether he had brought his watch with him, but he knew he hadn't. He didn't plan to bring it; he remembered thinking about it yesterday. His pocket watch was made of pure gold and was too valuable to risk carrying into the bloody forest. He had counted on his wand to show him the time. Though, now that it was broken, it obviously couldn't.

Draco struggled to get up, but his legs felt heavy and he growled in frustration. The sound was too loud in the quiet forest and Draco quickly scanned his surroundings, fearful he had heedlessly summoned some dangerous creature. Nothing moved around him, except for a few bare branches and a handful of fluttering snowflakes and Draco sighed in relief. His gaze caught something dark a little farther away, but it looked like a harmless log, half-buried in the snow. The trees weren't as thick there and the snow covered the grounds and the dark, frozen shape. Draco almost looked away when a flash of colour caught his attention. He stared at the dark form and the strap of multicoloured fabric peeking through the snow. The pattern looked eerily familiar.

The realisation hit him together with a gust of wind. Breathless, Draco shot to his feet, their previous

numbness forgotten in an instant. That was not a log; he knew exactly what the multicoloured fabric was; he had laughed at it a million times before. It was one of those stupid knitted scarves Granger was producing with maniacal speed.

Fighting dizziness, Draco sprang forward and stepped onto something that broke beneath his boot, but he paid no attention to it. He crossed the distance with four long strides, his lungs hurting from all the cold air he had inhaled in his haste; his chest felt too small to contain his frantically beating heart. His knees gave out the moment he spotted black strands of hair sticking out at odd angles, partially hidden by the snow. With trembling fingers, he brushed the snow away to reveal Harry Potter's frozen body, stretched prone on the ground. He gripped Potter's forearms and turned him around, not gentle in his urgency. Potter made no sound. He was deathly pale and as Draco brushed the snow off his cheek, he noticed a thin line of blood congealed at the corner of Potter's chapped, bluish lips. Potter's glasses were nowhere to be seen. There were three faint bruises on his jaw, as though someone had punched him, and his green eyes were closed; he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Draco hoped that Potter was merely sleeping. He didn't like the sight of blood on his lip, especially since his lips looked unharmed.

Draco took off a glove and pressed his palm to Potter's cheek.

It was ice cold.

The air was sparse suddenly. Draco couldn't draw a proper breath.

"Potter?" he whispered. His throat constricted painfully. "Potter!" he tried to say more loudly, but his voice refused to rise.

In the next moment, he was shaking Potter violently, cursing Potter's name and screaming, "Wake up!"

Even after he realised he was behaving like a mindless lunatic, he couldn't stop yelling and shaking Potter's shoulders.

"You're not dead!" he shouted. "For fuck's sake, Potter, you're not dead! Wake up!"

Potter didn't move or make a tiniest sound.

Draco gritted his teeth and forced himself to calm down; panic wouldn't help him. Potter couldn't be dead. That was ridiculous. Draco needed to find a pulse and prove that it was still beating. He quickly loosened Potter's scarf and pressed his fingertips against various places on Potter's neck, then he pulled up Potter's sleeves and touched his wrists with his thumb. But Draco's fingers were numb, and Potter's skin was so frightfully icy Draco couldn't feel anything. He leaned over Potter's body and pressed his cheek, and then his ear, right beneath Potter's nose. He thought he could feel the warm touch of breath but he wasn't sure. Potter's breath wasn't misting in front of him like Draco's.

Taking off his other glove, Draco grabbed Potter's thick cloak and unfastened a couple of buttons, parting the fabric so he could lean in and press his ear to Potter's chest. Wincing at the coldness, Draco listened. but he couldn't hear anything. Blood rushed to his ears and the sound of his own frantically beating heart drowned out everything else. Draco closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down and concentrate. After a few excruciatingly long moments, he finally heard it. It was slow and quiet and at odds with the rhythm of Draco's heartbeats, but he heard it. Potter's heart was still beating. He was alive.

Draco kept his ear pressed to Potter's chest for a moment longer, listening to the comforting sound. When he finally raised his head and looked down at Potter, his vision was blurry. He had to blink a couple of times to clear it. His gaze narrowed at the blood and the bruise on Potter's skin.

What the fuck had happened here? Did someone attack them? And what should he do? Should he scream for help? Run away to find it?

An idea struck Draco suddenly and he quickly checked Potter's pockets and even moved him a little so he could search the ground beneath. Dissatisfied, he looked around, chucking the snow away and inspecting their surroundings, but his target was nowhere in sight. If they had been attacked, and if Potter had been Disarmed, his wand could have been tossed away somewhere; it was unlikely Draco would find it. Draco shot up and carefully searched the grounds, moving branches and twigs aside, kicking the snow and dirt, and occasionally picking up worthless sticks.

"Accio Harry Potter's wand! Accio Harry Potter's wand!" he yelled. A distant growl was his only response.

Shivers passed through the length of Draco's spine. He closed his mouth, listening carefully. An owl hooted and flew over their heads, but then the forest fell silent again.

Draco breathed into his hands. It occurred to him he should at no point even consider screaming for help. The forest was dangerous and no amount of Slughorn's creepy smiles could change that fact.

A bit shaky on his feet, Draco headed back toward Potter, but he stepped on something again, the same thing he had crushed earlier with his boot, but this time he looked down to see what it was. He winced as he spotted Potter's broken glasses on the ground. He picked them up and dropped them into his pocket almost absentmindedly.

He had to think. Potter was still lying peacefully a few feet ahead and Draco couldn’t count on his help. They were unarmed and quite obviously lost. He couldn't scream for help. He couldn't carry Potter — he could barely carry himself. His best option was to try to reach the castle on his own and get help. But he didn't even know which way was north, not without his wand, and he couldn't just leave Potter lying there.

Could he?

An image appeared in Draco's mind, an image he had conjured in his bed last night, though it seemed like minutes ago. Hadn't he thought about this scenario? Hadn't he imagined Potter lying buried in the snow, crying out for help? Hadn't he gleefully planned to leave Potter in the woods so the git could freeze to death? And now something eerily similar had actually happened. Of course, last night, he had entertained himself with these thoughts, but he hadn't been serious. He had been upset and the silly thoughts had amused him. They weren't funny anymore.

Draco toyed with the broken glasses in his pocket. Why were Potter's glasses lying near Draco and not near Potter? How did that happen? More importantly, how did any of it happen? And why couldn't he remember? Surely, they were attacked. Obviously not by werewolves or any sort of predator. Potter wasn't bitten; in fact, Draco hadn't noticed any injuries. He had either been cursed or he was merely unconscious and frozen. Besides, a mindless creature wouldn't take Potter's wand.

It couldn't have been the centaurs, either. They wouldn't mind attacking Draco, but they wouldn't attack

Potter. That made no sense; they actually liked Potter. It could have been a student; a lot of students from Draco's house detested Potter. But which Slytherin would be dumb enough to think he could get away with murdering the Conqueror of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Not even Nott would be that stupid. It could have been a random ex-Death Eater, but then why the fuck was Potter even alive?

Draco's hand gripped the glasses in his pocket so tightly the glass cut his palm; he could feel the warm blood spread against his skin. Draco paid no attention to it; the blood that attracted his gaze was splattered on a stone near his feet. He stared at the bloody stone his head had been lying on as a terrible thought occurred to him.

It could have been him.

What if Potter and he had had a fight, which was a likely scenario, and Draco Disarmed Potter and threw away his wand? He could see himself doing it; it was something he would do. In his mind, he could see Potter's angry face as he lunged at Draco like the reckless Gryffindor he was. They fought. Draco knocked off Potter's glasses and Potter slammed Draco's head against the stone. Half-conscious, Draco managed to throw him off and stand before he shot a curse at Potter — a curse so powerful it made Potter fly backwards a few feet. And then as Draco's injuries caught up with him, he fell down on his right hand, breaking his wand in the process. Or maybe he had just tripped and hit his head on the stone as he fell; the blow could have cost him his memory. Either way, how Draco earned his injuries was irrelevant. What mattered was that Draco still had his wand in his hand and Potter didn't; no one had Disarmed Draco. What mattered was that Draco had thought about doing this; however jokingly, he had thought about it, and he had even threatened Potter's life yesterday in front of witnesses. If someone did find them, or if Draco miraculously reached Hogwarts, everyone would think he had attacked Potter, and Draco couldn't even defend himself, because as far as he knew they could be right. If Potter died in the woods, Draco was doomed; if he lived, then maybe he could tell everyone what happened. Draco had no idea if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

With his bottom lip trapped between his teeth, Draco raised his right hand and reluctantly inspected his knuckles. They felt sore and looked tender. As though . . . Draco closed his eyes. As though he punched someone.

Fuck. Draco ran his fingers through his hair. He grabbed a fistful of strands and pulled, causing himself pain. What was he thinking, attacking Potter like that?

Miserable, Draco staggered toward Potter and dropped to his knees again. Potter was in the same position he had left him in. It was painful to look at him.

"I'm sorry," Draco said quietly and then swung his hand and slapped Potter across his cheek. Potter's head turned to the side from the force of the impact. He made a small sound, but his lips didn't part and he didn't wake.

"Fuck!" Draco growled. He had never felt so helpless in his life. It didn't matter whether he had done this or not — he had no choice. He had to try and get help, regardless of the consequences. Draco stood up and eyed Potter's clothes; they were soaking wet from the snow. He had to at least move Potter closer to the trees where the snow was sparse and the ground was drier.

Draco sighed and stooped low, grabbing Potter's shoulders.

Moving him was easier said than done. He grabbed Potter's arms, then his legs, struggling to drag his heavy weight toward the large tree nearby. Its branches were thick enough to protect Potter from the snow. Potter's wet clothes and his unconscious, frozen state made him even heavier and Draco's numb limbs were weak. By the time he managed to settle Potter near the tree, he was utterly exhausted, but at least he felt a little warmer. Though, it was still terribly cold.

Draco looked at Potter's blue lips. Even if Potter wasn't grievously injured, which Draco doubted, he would freeze by the time the rescue party arrived. If Draco could only cast a Warming Spell on him. Half-heartedly, Draco took out his broken wand and attempted to cast the charm. All he managed to produce was a few sparks and some smoke. Returning his wand into his pocket, Draco kicked the tree, then winced as his toe started throbbing. Why did he have to fall so awkwardly he had broken his wand? It was just his luck.

Draco blinked and held his breath.

Luck.

Of course. He should have thought of it sooner. That was what he needed — a little bit of luck. The kind that came in a bottle.

Ecstatic at his idea, Draco quickly undid the clasp of his cloak and reached beneath his shirt collar. He closed his eyes in relief as he pulled out the little silver pendant. It was a tiny dragon, the tackiest piece of jewellery Draco had ever worn. Pansy teased him mercilessly for it, but she wouldn't have if she knew what it was. Draco pulled on the chain and the clasp gave, letting the dragon fall onto Draco's palm. Draco stared at it fondly for a moment and then gently stroked the dragon's wings. After a couple of strokes, the dragon stretched and yawned, then spread his silver wings wide and roared. In a flash of bright green light, it transformed into a minuscule bottle, filled with a glimmering golden potion.

The potion was Draco's future.

During the summer, Mother had pressed the dragon into his hand as Father had explained how to cheat on his N.E.W.T. exams using Felix Felicis.

"Take three drops before every exam," his father had said. "Not less, not more. If you take less, it will not work. If you take more, it could be detected."

Three drops wasn't much, but it was enough to ensure Draco wouldn't be asked a question he couldn't answer. It was a tiny push that meant Draco would achieve a perfect score; something that would impress the Ministry officials enough to make them forget whose son he was. Draco snorted as he uncapped the bottle. His future. It hardly mattered now. All he could hope for now was rotting in Azkaban forever after he became the murderer he was always meant to be.

Draco took a deep breath and tipped the bottle, letting its contents drip into his mouth. He closed his eyes, waiting for that feeling of confidence to strike him, just like the description of the potion had promised.

Nothing happened.

Minutes tickled by and, feeling increasingly cold and hopeless, Draco opened his eyes and glared at the tiny bottle. He swung his arm and smashed the bottle against a nearby tree. It shattered together with Draco's last hope. Who knew where his parents acquired the potion and how much they had paid? He would have to inform them that they had been viciously robbed.

Defeated, Draco knelt down next to Potter and stared at his pale face. How could Draco possibly leave him here to die? But there was absolutely nothing, nothing he could do.

You could grab Potter's nose.

Draco blinked. That had been his thought, though he had no idea why he would think suck a silly thing. Except, for some reason, it didn't sound as silly as it did originally; it actually seemed like a good idea. A brilliant idea, really.

Grinning, Draco reached down and pinched Potter's nose between his forefinger and his thumb. Moments passed, and Draco's confidence wavered. What if he was suffocating Potter to death?

But then, a miracle happened — Potter gasped, took a deep breath, and then coughed. He coughed out blood, but Draco was far too relieved to see Potter's eyelashes flutter to worry about that.

"Potter!" he said, releasing his nose. "Potter, wake up!"

Potter moaned, his eyes opening and closing slowly. Draco sprang to his feet and with a strength he didn't know he had, he lifted Potter's torso, dragging him closer to the tree so Potter could lean his head on the trunk and sit up. Potter protested, wincing and moaning in pain, and though Draco was aware he shouldn't be moving Potter too much, he just couldn’t let him fall asleep again. Sleep and coldness were a path toward a quick death.

Draco crouched down and grabbed Potter's face between his palms, peering into his face.

"Potter, you have to wake up and stand. We have to go."

Draco gritted his teeth, furious at his stupid statement. What was he talking about? Go where? He didn't even know in which direction they should start walking.

Northern wind will bring heavy snow.

Draco frowned. He heard that line before; read it actually. Yesterday in the Daily Prophet. It was a part of the weather forecast for Saturday.

Draco turned his head sharply to his left. Snowflakes flew directly into his face.

Left. North was left. His gaze fell on two large trees that made an archway with their branches. That was their path.

"Malfoy?" Potter whispered.

Draco turned toward Potter again. Potter's face was still captured between Draco's palms.

"Yes!" Draco said, smiling a little. "You recognise me. That's good. That's wonderful. It means you don't have a concussion." Draco frowned. "Which would be far less dangerous than internal bleeding, but never mind that now."

Potter's green eyes looked dull. "Mmm . . . injured," he mumbled, barely able to move his lips.

"Yes, you're injured. That's why you have to get up so we can find some help."

"No," Potter closed his eyes and Draco almost slapped him again, but Potter opened them quickly enough. "No, you. Your head . . > is bleeding."

Draco stared at him. "Right. We both need help/ That's why you have to get up. Gritting his teeth in effort, Draco tried to haul him upward. "Get up, Potter!" he snapped when Potter refused to move.

"I can't . . ." Potter moaned, shutting his eyes tightly. "It hurts. You go."

"You idiot!" Furious, Draco slapped Potter again. Green eyes flew open in surprise. "Do you want to die?" Draco asked. "Because you will die if you don't fucking get up."

"Malfoy, just go." Potter coughed again. A small red bubble formed at the corner of his mouth and then popped.

"You are an idiot," Draco growled.

No, he's a Saviour.

Draco stared at Potter's troubled green eyes. Of course. This was Potter. He was meant to save others, not himself. If Draco wanted Potter to move, he would have to give him a better reason.

Draco bit his lip, thinking furiously.

"Potter," he said firmly after awhile, "I need you to listen to me." Draco pulled his left sleeve up and revealed the ugly Dark Mark on his forearm. He raised his arm and Potter's gaze flickered toward it. He looked back at Draco uncomprehendingly. "I was a Death Eater, Potter, and as a Death Eater, I know some things. And what I know for a fact is that there are werewolves in this forest."

Potter frowned.

"No, Potter, it's true. There's a pack of them hiding here. Their leader is a friend of the family," Draco lied. "I didn't say anything before because I thought they wouldn't dare to go near Hogwarts, but while you were unconscious, I heard them."

"'s not full moon." Potter, despite his wretched state, still managed to raise his chin stubbornly.

"Potter, they're wild! It doesn't matter! Remember Greyback?" Draco cried and a glimmer of concern appeared in Potter's eyes. "There are students in this forest. Granger and Weasley are not far. Potter, we have to warn them. We have to . . . save them." Draco almost laughed. This was ridiculous. It would never work.

However, Potter's eyes widened. "Ron and Hermione?" His unfocused eyes clearing, Potter looked around frantically, as though he hoped he'd catch sight of that ghastly bushy head and his faithful orange potato. Draco almost felt bad for worrying Potter, but for the first time since he opened his eyes, Potter actually looked lucid.

"They can't . . ." Potter gasped. "Aurors are hunting them."

"And I'm telling you they haven't been caught, yet. Father had a few of them over for dinner the other day." Draco winced. That, perhaps, was going too far. Fortunately, Potter had another coughing fit and he might not have heard him.

"Come on, Potter. We have to do something. We can't let your friends die." Draco grabbed Potter, trying to lift him up again, and this time Potter helped.

Draco froze for a moment when Potter wrapped his arms around his neck, but he gathered his wits quickly and helped Potter stand. They stood like that for awhile, locked in an embrace as Potter panted and coughed against Draco's ear. Draco felt like he was hugging an ice cube, but nonetheless he pressed

his nose to Potter's snow-dampened hair and sent a thankful prayer to whatever deity let Potter live.

More than anything, Draco wanted to ask Potter whether he remembered what had actually happened, but he didn't dare. If Draco had done this to him, he wanted to postpone knowing that for certain for as long as he could.

"Oh God," Potter moaned and pulled away slightly, grabbing his stomach.

"No time for that, Potter. We have people to save," Draco said and firmly wrapped his left arm around Potter's waist. "Here, grab my arm."

Reluctantly, Potter let go of his stomach and grabbed Draco's left wrist, leaning heavily on it. Potter's right arm was still wrapped around Draco's neck.

Draco sighed inwardly. It seemed he would have to carry Potter after all.

Potter set his jaw and took a bold step forward, forcing Draco to follow. "Let's go," Potter said firmly.

It was hard not to stumble under Potter's weight. Their awkward position and the throbbing in Draco's head weren't helping.

Draco gritted his teeth. If Potter could walk despite his injuries and the cold, then so could he.

Slowly but surely, they made their way through the forest. Draco could only hope they would reach Hogwarts in time.

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Potter clutched his stomach. "I need to rest."

"Just a bit more," Draco assured him. They had been walking for a long while, though they hadn’t covered much ground. For the most part Draco had to drag Potter along, move the branches out of their way and keep an eye on the uneven ground. Potter stumbled over every twig, rock and lump of snow.

It was getting steadily darker but Draco caught a glimpse of light not far ahead. He decided that the light was their desired destination. It was as good a goal as any.

"You always say that," Potter whined.

"And I always lie. But now I'm telling the truth."

If possible, Potter felt even heavier. "Come on, Potter. I'll slap you again. You know I will."

"Tard," Potter mumbled.

Draco suspected Potter had tried to call him a bastard, but he let the insult slide. If Potter felt like insulting him, Draco could only encourage him. As long as Potter remained awake, he could say whatever the fuck he wanted. With the Felix Felicis help, they would reach Hogwarts in time. Perhaps the potion would even help Draco escape the attempted murder charge — if he really was the one who had cursed Potter. However, Draco doubted the potion had that much strength. One tiny swallow was all he had consumed.

"Hurray," Draco grumbled as they reached a small clearing. It was where the light was coming from. The

absence of thick trees made the air look brighter. Nothing to get excited about. It wasn't a way out of the forest.

A sense of utter despair washed over him. Maybe the potion had stopped working already.

"Now?" Potter asked.

Draco sighed and led Potter toward a tree. "Go on, sit."

But Potter couldn't sit on his own and Draco had to lower him down carefully.

"Aaand let go," Draco said testily as Potter sat — his arms were still wrapped firmly around Draco's neck, forcing Draco to crouch.

Potter lowered his hands and leaned his head against the tree. He was panting heavily, his face paler than ever. His eyes fluttered closed.

Draco knelt on the ground in front of him, vaguely miffed that he was being forced to kneel in front of Potter a lot today, and he reached over to slap Potter's cheek lightly. "Hey, Potter, what did we say? Eyes open and focused on the most gorgeous thing around, please."

Potter's eyes opened and he even cracked a small smile. "I'll need a mirror, then."

"Cute." Draco shook his head. "Come on, remember the werewolves? We can't waste time here."

"You lied. There are no werewolves."

Draco bit his lip and tried to think of a way to convince Potter he was telling the truth, but he was running out of arguments. The idea was completely daft to begin with. The fact that Potter believed it in the first place was the testament of his wretched state.

Potter closed his eyes again.

"You don't know that, Potter. Maybe . . ." Draco sank his teeth deeper into his bottom lip, then released it before he spoke. "Maybe the werewolves attacked us? You think it's possible?"

Potter's eyes fluttered open and a tiny line appeared between his eyes. "No, not . . ." Potter coughed. "Not werewolves."

Draco waited for Potter to say something else, but Potter just stared at him. It was hard to tell whether Potter's stare was accusing or merely unfocused.

"'m cold," Potter whispered.

"I know." Draco sighed. "Please, just hold on for a bit —"

A bird screeched loudly. Draco quickly turned around in time to see a small blue bird fall weightlessly to the ground. It didn't move again. Draco blinked and stared at the blue mass of feathers in disbelief. Then he laughed, a bit crazily.

"Oh, Potter, I don't believe it," he said through his laughter. "I think we just won Slughorn's contest."

Potter didn't reply. Draco abruptly stopped laughing, his gaze snapping back to Potter.

"Oh no, you don't!" he gasped, shaking Potter, who had fallen asleep while Draco wasn't looking. Draco shook him, yelled at him, slapped him and even pinched his nose again, but Potter made no reaction and

Draco quickly released his nose afraid he would murder Potter if he hadn't already. Potter's lips were parted ever-so-slightly and he might have been breathing through them. At least it seemed that way to Draco. He contemplated listening to Potter's heart again, but he was too afraid to find out for sure whether Potter was still alive or not. He simply had to be. The other possibility wasn't acceptable.

Grabbing Potter's head with his hands, Draco pressed his forehead to Potter's icy one. "Please, Potter, don't be dead." He stared at Potter's long dark eyelashes. They refused to move. As Draco moved back, Potter's head sagged forward.

Draco felt like crying, but his eyes remained obstinately dry. Why the fuck wasn't the potion helping? Why did it lead them here? It was just another lonely, quiet place.

Jobberknolls scream before they die.

Draco tore his gaze away from Potter and focused on the small bird. It was still there; nobody had claimed the prey.

Jobberknolls had a great memory and in the moment of their death they repeated every sound they had ever heard. It seemed that this particular Jobberknoll was either deaf or death had sneaked up on it too suddenly. Draco scanned his surroundings, but he couldn't see or hear anything. In fact, when he thought about it, the clearing was strangely quiet. He couldn't even hear or feel the wind, anymore. Draco stood up, purposefully not looking back at Potter — he couldn't bear the sight of his immobile form. He hurried toward the dead bird, not quite sure what he expected to find.

The bird lay on a patch of rotted leaves, looking unmarked, but definitely dead. Draco stared at it.

"Why the fuck did you die?" he asked the dead bird before he looked around again. The air felt unbearably heavy. There was something wrong with the clearing, but whatever it was the silent trees weren’t inclined to share the secret.

Bending down, Draco picked up some rocks and twigs and then sent them flying in every direction over

the clearing. They hit the other side completely unharmed. His jaw set, Draco took a few steps forward.

Nothing happened.

Boldly, he walked toward the centre of the clearing, but nothing stopped him and nothing attacked him.

"Well, this was productive." He sighed. His gaze fell on Potter's dark form, but he quickly looked away.

It's snowing.

Draco frowned. No, it wasn't. Though, it had been a second ago. A couple of snowflakes swirled around Potter, even though he was beneath a tree, but there were none in front of Draco, even though there was nothing to protect him from above. Leaning his head back, Draco looked at the grey sky. Far above his head, thick snowflakes danced on the wind like a thousand pinpricks of light scattered over the dull grey sky. Not one of them ever reached him. Maybe they melted before they reached the ground, but the ones near Potter hadn't.

One small rock was still in Draco's hand and he swung his arm and tossed it high in the air. It flew up effortlessly and then shot downward and vanished. Draco blinked, not sure if he had lost sight of it or if it really did vanish. He thought he could see speckles of dust fluttering toward the ground, right where the stone should have fallen.

Nonplussed, Draco looked around the clearing again.

The oddity struck him at once. He should have seen it right away, but while they were walking through the woods, he was had become accustomed to seeing patches of snow and patches of dry ground; it depended on the thickness of the trees. That was why he hadn't noticed it at first — there was no snow in the clearing. For several feet in each direction, to the very edge, where the trees were dense, the ground was perfectly dry. Which meant that something was protecting this small patch of ground. There had to be some sort of0magical barrier above him. One that killed birds and vanished stones and snow. Draco stood right beneath it but he was perfectly unharmed, as were the stones and twigs he had thrown every which way; the clearing was only protected from above. But why would someone protect a

clearing in a middle of nowhere? More importantly, how was that possible?

Draco looked up again; the sight of the swirling snow above made him feel like he was standing in the Great Hall. If this were a house, he'd be looking at a ceiling and he knew a little something about Charms one would cast on a ceiling. The Dissimilis Charm was the most effective one. The enchantment was concentrated on the ceiling and it spread downward over the walls to conceal the space between in a magical enclosure. He had long suspected that the Dissimilis Charm was a part of the enchantments cast on the Room of Requirement. The Charm was actually used in interior decorating; it helped create two different rooms which occupied the same space, their accessibility depending on the different points of entrance. Though, its more nefarious use was more interesting. The Charm was often cast to hide a room within a room.

His father had a room like that. If one walked through the door, he would end up in his father's study; if, however, one focused on the portrait of Emeric the Evil that hung near the door, and made threatening gestures, Emeric would leap forward and wave his wand menacingly, in the process revealing a doorknob hidden behind his back. If one then entered the room through the portrait, he would end up in his father's other study, which contained a lot of incriminating potions and cursed objects. The Charm was highly useful and effective, but Draco had never heard of outdoor uses for such a spell. One needed a ceiling to cast it, but perhaps a ceiling was only needed to protect wizards and witches from the obviously lethal effects.

It was a powerful Charm. Draco couldn't imagine why someone would cast it in a middle of a forest. Who knew what was hidden inside? It could have been something dangerous; something it would be wiser not to discover. On the other hand, Draco didn't have much to lose at the moment and, apparently, it was his lucky day. The potion had brought him here, hadn't it? It must have done so for a reason. Draco counted on that luck to help him find the entrance.

There could only be one entrance into the hidden area, and since whoever cast the Charm was crazy enough to cast it in the middle of the forest, they at least had to make sure that no magical being or creature could stumble upon the entrance by accident. Draco had no idea how that could possibly work. Even if one needed to enter under a special angle, one day someone would breach the wards and find the concealed space — it simply couldn't be controlled. It was a poor way to hide something, but the Dissimilis Charm was very difficult to cast, so the caster had to have been someone clever.

The entrance couldn't have worked as it did for the Room of Requirement. If all one had to do was know exactly what they were looking for to enter the place, it would have been too easy. Draco doubted that

the place existed merely to provide weary travellers with a shelter. That meant the concealment had to depend on an unexpected form of entry, just like his father's study. Except, portraits were half-sentient and their embedded magic made them perfect guardians of hidden passageways. There was nothing in this clearing one could use for such an entrance.

Maybe the caster wasn't as clever as Draco thought, and he or she hoped that no one would find the entrance randomly. Unconvinced, Draco looked around, casting his gaze around the clearing, hoping he'd notice something odd. He walked toward the edge of the clearing, where the ground was covered by snow, and tried to enter the clearing from all sorts of directions. Nothing extraordinary happened.

After awhile, he decided he was merely wasting time. He almost gave up, but then his gaze passed a large oak tree. Its trunk was very wide and two thorny bushes encircled it. Whoever stepped into the clearing couldn't possibly reach it from that direction. Feeling like a complete idiot, Draco walked toward the large tree and turned, pressing his back firmly to the rough tree bark. He edged slowly toward the very centre of the tree and closed his eyes. He was sure of one thing — no one would ever think of entering the clearing in such a manner, except maybe a crazy Hogwarts student high on Felix Felicis. Concentrating, Draco took two steps forward and, after taking a deep breath, opened his eyes.

He was yet again standing in the clearing.

Cursing loudly, Draco kicked the ground with his boot. He was sure that the unreasonably large tree marked the entrance, because nothing else possibly could. Of course it wasn't that easy. One probably needed a wand to enter it, anyway.

Draco stared at the silent trees. It was time to give up. He couldn't think of anything clever. One had to enter the clearing either by flying into it from above, which was deadly, or emerging from the forest through the trees.

Draco's mind came to a screeching halt.

Through the trees.

His gaze snapped back to the large oak tree. What if the entrance worked just like the passageway that led to Platform nine and three-quarters? An inconspicuous solid barrier for which one just had to believe it would let him pass through instead of smashing his head if he tried. What if the large tree didn't mark the entrance, but was the entrance?

It was worth a shot.

Draco walked around the tree and stared at it a bit apprehensively. He remembered what his mother told him before he first passed through the barrier to reach the Platform.

"Concentrate and be very sure of yourself. Do not hesitate."

He had been positive he would end up with a head injury, but he trusted his mother.

Taking a deep breath, Draco concentrated on reaching the other side and then took two hurried steps forward. His eyes closed the moment his face approached the trunk of the tree, but he took another bold step.

There was no pain. He didn't hit his head.

Draco's eyes flew open and he almost laughed out of sheer joy. Despite all logic, it had actually worked. It was like he had entered another world. Bright light surrounded him and even the air felt warmer; the winter didn't freeze the magically hidden place. Biting his lip, Draco strode forward through a short passageway and passed beneath a glowing arc that led toward the circular space surrounded by a magical barrier. The forest was still visible; the wards shimmered gold on the inside, but he could see outside through a thin veil of magic. On the other side of the clearing, Potter's dark form looked bathed in gold. Disturbingly, it looked like Potter had no feet. They must have breached the barrier and Draco couldn't see them since Potter wasn't a part of the enchantment.

In the very middle of the clearing there was an unimpressive-looking cabin. It was made of wood and it looked small and deserted, but Draco nonetheless grinned as he rushed toward the door. He didn't bother to knock and it only occurred to him that the door could have been locked after he had already

opened it. With such powerful magic protecting it, a Locking Charm was the last thing the cabin needed.

It was darker inside, but light seeped through the open door and Draco quickly scanned the interior, noticing various shelves, cabinets, closets, and the fortunate lack of inhabitants. Draco's gaze fell gleefully on a large fireplace; there was no fire, but a basket full of logs was placed next to it.

For the first time since he drank the potion, Draco felt hopeful, as though until that moment his despair had been too strong to allow the potion to work properly.

"You'd better not be dead, Potter," Draco mumbled as he turned and rushed outside.

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Foolishly, Draco thought that dragging Potter to the cabin would be his biggest problem, but he felt much stronger now that he had found a place for them to hide from the cold. In his elated state, it wasn't that hard to drag Potter across the clearing and toward the tree. Of course, it probably wasn't wise to move Potter around so much, but Draco had no other choice. Potter was freezing and if the curse didn't kill him, hypothermia would. If Potter was somewhere warm, then maybe Draco could leave him and continue on his own. The thought was unappealing for more than one reason, but he had no other clever ideas.

Draco tried to be as careful with Potter as he could, but manoeuvring his body through the tree and the narrow passageway was not easy. However, Draco's true problems began once Potter was safely placed upon the cabin's floor.

Firstly, the cabin had no windows and Draco had to leave the door open so he could see his surroundings. It was warmer beneath the magical barrier, but it was still cold. Potter would never be warm enough if Draco had to allow the cold air to seep inside. He thought he'd resolve all his troubles

quickly if he started a fire — it would provide him with both warmth and light. However, that led to his second obstacle. He had a fireplace, he had logs, but he had nothing to start the fire with. He searched the cabin, not really sure what he was looking for, but he hoped he would get lucky and find something that would help him start a fire. He found nothing of the sort but he did find all kinds of things: cauldrons, knives, plants, various parts of magical creatures and plenty of other similar items. The cabin was filled with potion supplies, though Draco had yet to find an actual potion. Shrugging, he concluded the place was a storage room of some sort.

The strangest thing he had noticed was a large metal contraption fixed to the south wall. Draco had never seen anything like it, but upon further inspection, he noticed that there was a blanket and what looked like a mattress stuck between the metal and the wooden wall. Separating the metal from the wall seemed impossible, but Draco needed that blanket. He pulled and shook, and cursed a lot, and finally the metal gave and fell. Draco jumped backwards, already resigned to a serious case of broken toes, but the metal object never touched his feet. The contraption stopped itself before falling completely, hovering above the ground. Draco stared at it for a minute before he burst out laughing. It was a bed. Of course it was. Why else would it hide a mattress and a blanket? But Draco had never seen a metal bed fixed to a wall. After he thought about it, he realised it was probably arranged like that to save space. It reeked of a Muggle invention, but Draco was too pleased that he had found a warm-looking blanket to waste time on shaking his head at silly Muggles.

He hurried to Potter's side. He planned to drag Potter to the bed and then close the door. It wasn't an ideal solution, but it was the only one Draco could think of.

Potter looked terrible. His lips were blue and his face was paper white. Draco touched Potter's forehead, but quickly pulled his hand away. Potter's skin was so cold, Draco's stomach rolled. He hadn't checked for signs of life since Potter collapsed upon reaching the clearing. For all Draco knew, Potter had been dead for a while now. He certainly looked dead: lying quietly on the floor, his eyes closed and body rigid.

Draco pushed his depressing thoughts away. He couldn't afford to think like that. Potter couldn't die now, not when Draco had actually found a shelter. Stubbornly concluding that Potter was alive, Draco didn't check his pulse, but grabbed his shoulders so he could drag him toward the bed. The moment Draco touched Potter's cloak, he realised his plan wouldn't work. Potter's clothes were frozen and wet; unlike Draco, Potter had spent a lot of time lying in the snow. Draco would have to take off his clothes, but then all that would keep Potter warm was a measly blanket and possibly Draco's fur-lined cloak that was much drier than Potter's. It wouldn't be enough. Draco had to start that stupid fire. If only he could make his wand work, he could warm up Potter. But a broken wand couldn’t Conjure fire.

Broken wands can backfire.

The odd sense of déjà vu struck him. He'd had similar thoughts earlier that day. He had even tried to cast a Warming Charm, but failed spectacularly. All he could produce was smoke. And sparks. Fucking sparks.

Draco reached into his pocket and took out his broken wand. He remembered his second year and the fortunate way he had escaped the slug-eating hex Ron Weasley had directed at him. Hadn't Weasley broken his wand and fixed it with Spellotape? It didn't work properly, but that didn't matter — all Draco needed was a few sparks.

Draco rushed toward a small desk in the corner and pulled open the large drawer beneath the desktop. No self-respecting storage room could exist without Spellotape. Sure enough, Draco found it along with some expensive-looking parchments. He grabbed the parchments and tossed a few them into the fireplace. Then he tried — wretchedly — to Spellotape his broken wand.

Once he concluded he fixed the wand as well as he could, he grabbed a piece of parchment in one hand and his wand into the other.

Trying to start a fire in a wooden cabin with a faulty wand wasn't the brightest idea, but Draco set his jaw, waved his wand and cried, "Incendio!"

Smoke and sparks flew everywhere. The parchment caught fire and Draco quickly threw it into the fireplace. Grinning in victory, he almost failed to notice that his wand and his sleeve had caught fire, as well. Draco quickly released his wand, stomping on it as he waved his right arm around. Fortunately, his cloak was too damp to catch fire properly. His wand, however, was completely ruined — the Spellotape and the wood turned black; only the unicorn hair looked intact.

Draco stared at the fireplace with trepidation. If the fire didn't catch, that was it — he definitely couldn't use his wand anymore; it was damaged beyond repair. The parchment burned up and Draco tossed the rest of the paper stash he had found in the drawer into the fireplace. The fire roared but subsided quickly; for a minute, it looked like it would die completely, but then faint crackling filled Draco's ears,

and one of the logs slowly caught fire.

Draco closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. His lungs ached; he had forgotten to breathe.

The fire flared and, happily, Draco rushed to close the door. Perhaps it was merely his imagination, but he thought it was warmer already. Draco's gaze fell on Potter's blue lips and then, for the umpteenth time that day, he knelt next to Potter.

He stroked the buttons of Potter's cloak, concluding — or imagining — that Potter's chest was rising and falling almost imperceptibly.

"Well, Potter, it looks like I'm stuck in Professor Dirtythought's wet dream," Draco grumbled as he began taking off Potter's clothes.

It wasn't an easy task. Draco had actually broken a sweat by the time he took off Potter's cloak, boots, socks and trousers. Potter's shirt and pants were either wet, or simply very cold, and Draco struggled with himself for a long moment before deciding to take those off, too. The sight of Potter's naked chest brought him immense joy — without Potter's cloak and shirt protecting it, he could see quite clearly that Potter was still breathing.

Before he took off Potter's shirt completely, Draco dragged him onto the mattress he had previously pulled off the bed and placed directly in front of the fireplace.

Potter's skin was icy and Draco avoided touching it as much as he could; every tiny contact made him shiver. As he pulled Potter's pants down, he tried hard not to look at Potter's crotch, but his gaze strayed and caught sight of the dark patch of coarse hair, Potter's flaccid cock, and his rounded sacks. Draco's fingers grazed the soft skin of Potter's thighs as he grumpily acknowledged that Potter had nothing to be embarrassed about, not even in his frozen state. In the next moment, Draco contemplated slapping himself for thinking about the size of Potter's bits at such a time.

He felt a lot better once the temptation of Potter's nude body was hidden safely beneath the blanket.

A proper bed needs a pillow.

Draco frowned and quickly took off his cloak. He folded it so the fur was outside and the wet patches were wrapped underneath. He gently lifted Potter's head and then lowered it against the fur.

Taking a step back, he admired his handiwork. The fire cast yellowish light over Potter's skin, making him look a little less pale. It seemed like he could actually be warm enough amidst the fur and beneath the blanket. Draco beamed at him. It was a lot easier to look at Potter's sleeping form, now.

However, Draco's happiness vanished too quickly. He was deluding himself. Potter was barely alive. He had coughed out blood and clutched his stomach and that meant his stomach and his lungs were injured. He was bleeding internally and he had nearly frozen to death, and on top of that he had walked around in that state, and Draco had moved him and shook him and hauled his wounded body all over the place. It was a miracle that Potter was still alive.

Draco had thought about leaving Potter here and rushing for help, but even if he found help, he wouldn't find it in time. Potter would just die sooner because there would be no one here to keep the fire going.

A proper bed needs a pillow.

The thought troubled Draco. Potter didn't need a pillow; Draco's cloak was soft enough. Besides, Draco couldn't find one. But, then again, why was that? He had found a bed and a blanket, but there was no pillow in sight. It could have meant that whoever slept here was an oddball who had something against pillows. If it were only that, it wouldn't bother Draco at all, but that wasn't the only peculiarity. Now that he thought about it, several things about this cabin troubled Draco greatly. It was filled with potions supplies, but he hadn’t found a single potion — and Potter could use some. He’d found a bed, but it had no pillows. The cabin was protected by powerful enchantments designed to save space, but the owner decided to save cabin's space by folding an odd Muggle bed against the wall. It was a strange set of contradictions. Moreover, why go through so much trouble to hide some potion ingredients? Sure, some of them were valuable, but it was still insane. A stash of actual potions, however . . . Now, that was worth hiding. Which meant it was highly likely Draco was missing something. If there were potions here, they were hidden. But where?

Draco looked at the metal bed. It was the only thing out of place. If the bed wasn't meant to be slept in, then it had to hide something.

Draco walked closer and inspected the bed and the wall carefully. He pushed left and right, looked over the bed and under it, but he couldn't find anything. Crossing his hands on his chest, he scowled at the metal. He remembered it was hard to stretch the bed when he first tried, which could possibly mean the bed was normally pressed against the wall and rarely used. Frowning, Draco pushed it up against the wall and then took a step back to stare at it. If the bed didn't serve as a bed, and it wasn't used to hide some sort of door in the wall, then maybe the bed had another purpose.

Draco cocked his head. Lifted up like that, with its metal bars and without the mattress, it almost looked like a window. Maybe that was it. Maybe the bed itself was a passageway. Yet another magical barrier, Draco had to breach using nothing but the power of his will. It worked once today.

Slowly, Draco took a step forward and pressed his foot against the bed, willing it to go through the metal and wall. And it did.

Grinning, even though he had no idea what he would find on the other side, Draco pushed his whole body forward through the metal. His grin broadened as he passed thought the barrier effortlessly and found himself in another room. It was roughly the same size as the one he had left Potter in, but this room was lit — by the glimmering light of hundreds and hundreds of potions.

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Draco was no healer; he had no interest in the profession. Potions were far easier. When you made a potion, you could either make a good one or a bad one. It was easy to test it and tell whether it satisfied. And if it didn't, you simply tried again until you got it right. The process could be labelled as frustrating, but Draco preferred to call it challenging. However, healing was a whole different matter. If you screwed

up once, you didn't get a second chance.

But at this point in time, it didn't really matter. He didn't have time to experiment, anyway. Potter was all but dead and whatever Draco did, he couldn't make his condition worse. Nonetheless, he had to select the potions carefully.

Draco picked up a blood red potion from the shelf which he knew re-grew damaged tissue and replenished blood. All such potions that had to re-grow part of a human body were highly invasive, just like the curses that caused the damage. The first rule of healing, and the only one Draco remembered, was: never heal the effects of the curse; nullify the curse itself. It was something Draco couldn't do, because he had no idea which curse had struck Potter. If Draco had cast it himself, he had a few vague ideas, but he couldn't be sure he had used any of them.

He worried about the matter for a long while. He looked over the various potions and found many he recognised and a lot he had never even heard of. In the end, he decided he would have to experiment, at least a little. After all, the fact that he had found this cabin and all these potions meant that Felix Felicis was still working. Perhaps he should simply follow its guidance. Just in case, he spent a couple of minutes looking for a bottle of liquid luck, but he found none, so he gave up, realising he was only wasting precious time.

Soon enough, Draco rushed back to the other room with four vials in his hands. The first one was a simple Wakefulness Solution that was meant to force Potter to wake up temporarily. Giving an injured person that particular potion wasn't recommended, Potter's body would suffer a shock, but Draco didn't know how else to make Potter swallow everything he ought to. The second was the blood red tissue-repairing potion that could cause more harm than good. The moment it began to repair the damage, most curses would react violently and double their effect, but that was why Draco brought with him a small vial with glowing silver liquid. It was filled with melted Occamy eggs. In theory, the solution should hide the effects of the tissue-repairing potion from the curse. The fourth vial, with bright green oil, was needed to make sure Potter didn't die from the poisoning Occamy eggs could cause. It was a convoluted plan, and only a temporary solution, but with a little bit of luck it could work. The curse wouldn't be defeated, merely dormant, but Potter ought to recover enough to live until he reached the able hands of Madam Pomfrey.

Feeding Potter the potions went as planned. Potter moaned and opened his eyes when Draco let two drops of the Wakefulness Solution fall against his lips. Potter didn't recognise him, or say a word, but at least he swallowed everything Draco gave him before he fell asleep again. Draco remained kneeling

behind him awhile longer. Potter's head rested on Draco's shoulder and his back was pressed against his chest. Draco had held him upright so Potter could drink without choking. Potter was still frightfully cold and his skin chilled Draco to the bone even through his shirt, but Draco was reluctant to let him go, afraid that when he did, Potter would have a bad reaction to the potions and die. It was an irrational thought, but Draco couldn’t shake it. He leaned forward and his lips touched Potter's hair and lingered there for a few long, peaceful moments.

Unnerved by his behaviour, Draco pulled back and lowered Potter's head against the fur, before he stood up and took a hasty step back. He had to lean down again, however, to pull the blanket to Potter's chin.

He stared at him for a bit, but Potter's condition remained unchanged. Draco didn't know how long it would take for the potions to work.

Setting the vials aside, Draco added more logs to the fire and sat down on the floor near Potter's feet. Miserable, he crossed his legs, fixed his gaze on Potter's face, and waited.

III.

The Answer

Luck is when opportunity knocks and you answer.

~ Anonymous

I am an utter lunatic, Draco thought as he wrapped his arms even tighter around Harry Potter's nude body.

At first, he was merely bored, but still sane. Someone had to look after the fire, so he had to stay awake and there was little he could do to amuse himself. Staring at Potter's closed eyelids was hardly eventful and Draco had to find something else to pass the time. He went to inspect the various potions in the other room. He riffled through the bottles, trying to find something useful and interesting. In the end he drank a Cheering Solution, not because he believed it would actually cheer him up, but because he was thirsty and the solution tasted like Pumpkin Juice. He did feel a bit better after he had drunk it.

He returned to Potter's side with a shimmering white healing paste and a soft cloth in his hands. He had a sudden desire to heal every cut and bruise Potter had suffered; boredom and the Cheering Solution were surely at fault. Draco applied the paste to the bruise on Potter's jaw, on a cut across his cheek where a branch had hit him while they were walking through the forest, on a bump on the back of his head where Potter must have hit the ground when he fell, and even on Potter's chapped lips that healed instantly when the paste touched it.

He was in the process of wiping off the blood and paste from Potter's face when an awful thing happened. It started slow — goose bumps appeared on Potter's skin, spreading over his arms and chest, and then Potter began to shiver. Draco quickly pulled his cloak from underneath Potter's head and wrapped Potter's shivering body with it.

It didn't help in the slightest. Soon, Potter's shivers intensified, his eyelids fluttering and lips parting to utter moans of distress; Draco could hear his teeth clicking together. It looked almost like he was having some sort of seizure.

Draco threw a few more logs on the fire and then all but lay down on Potter, holding his shivery form wrapped safely in the blanket and the cloak. Potter's condition only worsened.

It occurred to Draco that the shivering could have been a good sign. It could have meant that the curse had released Potter and allowed him to wake up from his deep slumber; he was awake enough to finally feel the chills of his frozen body. But it was small comfort to know that Potter might not die from the curse, but that he might die from hypothermia, instead. Either way, he would die and Draco couldn't give him another potion to warm him up. Every single potion that could have been used to heal such effects would not work well with the potions Draco had already given him. He had shoved too many of them down Potter's throat, already.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on one's perspective, Draco's mind refused to shut up about the wonders of body heat. The thought had been buried and hidden in a traitorous corner of Draco's brain ever since he had first wondered how he could provide Potter with extra heat. Minutes ticked by, Potter's shivers showed no signs of subsiding and Draco just couldn't stand looking at his trembling form any more.

Cursing his mind, Potter, and Slughorn for good measure, because none of this would have happened if he hadn't sent them into the forest, Draco stripped and lay down next to Potter, wrapping his whole body around Potter's ice cold, shivering frame. He had to clench his teeth tightly together to stop himself from crying out. Potter's frozen skin threatened to pull Draco toward a frosty death, but knowing that wouldn't happen, Draco pressed Potter's back against his chest and rubbed Potter's skin wherever he could reach.

Draco's attempts to warm up Potter by lying down beside him, completely naked, weren't an indication of his insanity, however. He had to provide Potter with heat and his actions were perfectly reasonable, not to mention successful. However, after Potter's body had warmed and he turned around to sleepily bury his head in the crook of Draco's neck, Draco made no attempt to get up. On the contrary, he wrapped his arms around Potter's back, pressed him closer to his body, and to make matters worse, the fingers of Draco's left hand insisted on burying themselves into Potter's messy hair and refused to stop caressing the soft, black strands compulsively.

But that was not the sure sign of Draco's lunacy, either. He could easily rationalise his behaviour. They were lost in a middle of the forest, injured and frozen and Potter had nearly died; Draco's sudden urge to cuddle Potter silly was surely an expected reaction to a severe trauma. It was perfectly natural.

The thing that convinced Draco he was an utter lunatic was the very disturbing fact that as Potter pressed his front snugly to Draco's side, Draco's body had a very inappropriate reaction. He could hardly blame trauma for it. What made Draco even crazier was that even after Potter made some faint mumbling sounds and began to shift around slightly as though he would wake any second, Draco made no attempt to extract himself from Potter's embrace and hide his nudity and his steadily growing erection. He was purposely pushing himself into an embarrassing situation — who knew what Potter's reaction would be when he woke up and realised Draco was holding him to his nude and aroused body? However, the crazy part of Draco's brain urged him to clutch Potter for as long as he was allowed and worry about the consequences later.

The moment came sooner than Draco would have liked.

Potter grumbled against Draco's neck and slowly raised his head. Unfocused green eyes blinked and stared at Draco incredulously. With brain-freezing apprehension, Draco stared back, waiting for an explosion.

Potter looked much better. There was colour in his cheeks and his healed and cleaned face had lost that terrifying frozen quality. His pupils were too wide and his eyes looked dim. More than anything, Draco wished to press his palm to Potter's forehead but he didn't dare to move. Judging by the warmth of Potter's skin pressed snugly to Draco's, Potter had a fever, but without a wand Draco simply couldn't be certain. As far as he was concerned, the whole cabin was unbearably hot, but he didn't really trust his senses at the moment.

A line appeared between Potter's eyes as he stared at Draco without blinking.

"Malfoy?" he whispered, sounding almost fearful.

"An admirable guess," Draco praised. He decided that all he had to do was claim that everything he'd done, he had done to save Potter's life. After all, it was the truth even though, for some reason, it didn't feel like the truth, but merely fanciful rationalisation on his part. Draco was well aware that Potter might not be grateful in the slightest if Draco had been the one who had cursed him in the first place. He could only hope that if Potter's intentions turned murderous, Draco could easily overpower him. Potter was undoubtedly weak and disoriented.

However, for now, Potter merely looked confused. He looked around the cabin, his eyes widening as his gaze passed over the interior, the fireplace, their bed and finally their nude state and their intimate position.

"Bloody hell." Potter gasped as his gaze reached Draco's eyes again.

"I can explain," Draco said quickly and then winced. He sounded much too defensive. He had to phrase his explanation and apology carefully. Maybe, just maybe, if Draco was convincing and humble enough,

Potter would forgive him for cursing him. It was an unlikely outcome, but Draco had to try. Grovelling sounded like a good idea at the moment. It was no time to stress about losing his pride. He did not wish to end up in Azkaban, and Potter was the only one who could save him from that horrible fate.

"Oh, you don't have to." Potter shook his head. His eyes still looked impossibly wide. "It's self-explicatory, I think."

"It is?"

Potter shifted suddenly and Draco made a breathless sound of surprise. It seemed that not only his body had an inappropriate reaction to their intimate alignment; a distinct hardness was poking and scorching Draco's thigh.

Though Draco's shock was substantial upon the discovery, it was nothing compared to how he felt when Potter's face split into a humongous grin.

"Not that I'm complaining, but this is highly embarrassing." Potter chuckled, beaming at Draco as though he had just been told Christmas had come early.

"Er, I agree, but like I said, I can explain." Draco tried to shift around, but Potter rolled on top of him and trapped him beneath his body. "I can also get up and dress before explaining," Draco added, unnerved.

Potter grinned even wider, as though he didn't even hear what Draco had said. "My mind is a scary place." Potter's gaze raked over Draco's face in wonder.

"Er . . ."

"I mean, we're in a cabin. A freaking cabin. Lying in front of a fireplace, covered with . . ." Potter grabbed Draco's cloak and stared at it. "With fur. Actual fur."

After a moment of silence, Draco reached up and pressed his palm to Potter's forehead. "You are delirious," he concluded. Potter was too warm and now that Draco looked at him more carefully, he noticed his eyes were still unfocused. Granted, Potter didn't have his glasses, but that didn't explain why the whites of his eyes were slightly bloodied. The fever must have been a reaction to the Occamy eggs.

Draco's hand slid over Potter's cheek, but retracted quickly after Potter leaned into the touch, with a movement and a sound one would expect from a cat. Draco frowned. Potter needed another potion to lower his fever, but Draco had already given him one that should have negated the effects of the Occamy egg poisoning. It was up to Potter's own body to fight against it.

"Potter," Draco said slowly, trying in vain to get up; Potter weighed a ton. "You need to sleep and get some rest, all right? You're injured and —"

"Sleep?" Potter echoed before he laughed again. "I think I have that part covered. You can't dream unless you're sleeping."

Draco blinked. "You're not dreaming."

Potter gave Draco a withering look; the kind one would direct at someone who wasn't very bright. "Malfoy, we are alone in a bed, naked, covered with fur, in front of a fire, in a cabin. Of course I'm dreaming." Potter's expression grew pensive. "It's a sad fact that I probably should have listened to the Dursleys when they forbade me to watch the telly. Apparently, we're stuck in a cheesy movie from the eighties. It's vaguely embarrassing."

"Potter, listen to yourself — You're babbling," Draco insisted. He did not understand a word Potter had just said.

Potter's expression became so serious, Draco thought he had finally convinced him of the truth, but Potter's gaze was fixed on Draco's throbbing temple.

"You're injured," Potter said, for a moment sounding distressed, but then he burst out laughing again. "Of course you are! Injuries are a must when cabins and fireplaces are involved. A skiing accident, no doubt." Potter chuckled.

"Potter, for fuck's sake, focus," Draco snapped. "You're not dreaming. We're in the Forbidden Forest. You were injured. I found this —"

"Aha!" Potter cried in victory. He had slipped off Draco, reached sideways and found the healing paste next to their makeshift bed. "I just wished for something to heal you with, and it appeared next to us. Not a dream. Honestly."

Draco closed his eyes. "Potter, I placed the paste there — Ow!" Draco winced as Potter applied the paste to Draco's temple.

"Sorry." Potter grimaced, his touch becoming gentler.

Potter's face was dangerously close to Draco’s. They shared the same air; air that was suddenly hard to breathe in. Draco's temple tingled as Potter caressed his skin even though there was no need for that — once applied, the paste had an instant effect. Potter's eyes were narrowed and he looked highly concentrated on his task. Draco planned to stop him and get up, but instead of executing that — logical — line of action his eyelashes fluttered and he closed his eyes, enjoying in the soft, tender touch of Potter's fingertips.

"And, look!" Potter said, still gleeful. "Now I found a random cloth. How convenient."

Draco sighed as Potter dabbed at his face, cleaning the paste residue and blood. After all that fear and worry, it felt incredible to just lie down, feeling warm and safe and taken care of. It was a pity Draco couldn't pretend this really was a dream.

The touch of Potter's lips on his temple pulled Draco out of his daze. His eyes flew open.

Potter raised his head, propped himself on his elbow, and grinned down at him; his hand still caressed Draco's cheek. Potter's messy hair had fallen into his eyes, dark locks mixed with his eyelashes; his cheeks looked even pinker and his lips looked unusually full. Though Draco had things to say, they were temporarily forgotten as he spent moments appreciating how very green Potter's eyes were. Without his glasses, framed by his dark lashes and hair, they were greener than ever.

"There," Potter whispered, looking very pleased with himself as he inspected Draco's face carefully. "Perfect."

Draco shivered. There were emotions in those eyes; so clear and so obvious, Draco's throat constricted. Why was Potter looking at him like that? Draco quickly ran through the ingredients used in the potions he had given Potter, but not one of them could have produced the effect of a Love Potion. The effects of the Cheering Solution could have induced such a state — to an extent — but Draco was the one who had drunk it. And now that he thought about it, the Cheering Solution was the perfect culprit. Draco could blame it for the fact that his arms were still wrapped around Potter; one of them was trapped beneath Potter's body while the fingertips of his free hand traced lazy circles over the alluring curve of Potter's spine.

"Why would you dream about me?" Draco asked, his gaze tracing over Potter's shoulders and arms and the top of his chest, which had escaped the cover of blanket and cloak. Illuminated by the firelight, Potter's skin looked golden.

Potter's smile was indulgent. "I stopped asking myself that question some time ago," he said and then leaned down.

Potter will kiss me.

The thought formed in Draco's mind and for a moment he was frozen in complete shock. He tried to free his hands but he wasn't fast enough. At the very last second, right before Potter's lips touched his, Draco turned his head sideways and Potter pressed a kiss to the corner of Draco's mouth. It didn't seem to bother Potter. He pressed soft kisses to every part of Draco's face he could reach; his jaw, cheek, temple, and he even strayed toward Draco's ear, moving down towards Draco's hairline and neck.

"Potter." Draco gasped and turned around. He hastily freed his hand and cupped Potter's face, but not before Potter managed to press one warm, quick kiss to Draco's lips. Draco's stomach did an odd flip-flop.

"Stop!" Draco cried, pushing Potter's face away. His thumb brushed against Potter's lips and Potter's tongue darted out of his mouth to lick it.

With a pathetic choking sound, Draco moved his thumb away. He rose up on his elbow, keeping Potter's face at a safe distance.

The corners of Potter's mouth turned downward. "Honestly, Malfoy. Don't be difficult. You're difficult enough when you're not a figment of my imagination."

"Potter, I am not a figment of your imagination. This is not a dream," Draco said firmly. "Don't you remember our walk through the forest? Where do you think you are?"

"I'm in my bed, in my dormitory. Dreaming." Potter looked utterly sure of himself.

"And the forest? Remember the damn forest? And the pain and the walk?"

Potter frowned. "Um. That must have been a dream, too. An awful one."

Draco growled in frustration. "No, Potter, that wasn't a dream, either. You were cursed. Do you . . . . Do you remember who cursed you?" Draco winced. He wished he hadn't asked that. He wanted Potter to sleep and rest as he ought to, and he didn't really want him to remember what happened if it meant he would start hitting Draco instead of kissing him. Though, in all honesty, Draco would have preferred hitting to kissing. Hitting he deserved, kissing he did not.

"I wasn't cursed; you were," Potter said in a petulant voice of a child, as though Draco had accused him of theft. Draco sighed, but Potter frowned again. "No, wait. I remember." Potter's eyes went round and Draco stopped breathing. "We were attacked by werewolves!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!"

Potter grinned. "You told me that. And you said we have to go and save Ron and Hermione. And you said something about inviting werewolves to dinner . . . That was strange. Like dreams usually are. And then we were flying through the forest . . ."

"We were not flying."

"It felt like flying. And you were hugging me a lot . . ."

"I was helping you stand!"

"And then the dream changed and we ended up here." Potter beamed. "See? I had a very silly nightmare, but it's over and now I'm having a — well, a very tacky, to be honest — but a lovely dream."

"You know," Draco said pensively, "I think . . . if I smack you and knock you out, the blow won't cause too much damage. You'll definitely fall asleep, then."

"Draco?" Potter looked at him earnestly and Draco's mind stopped working, slowly processing the fact that Potter had just called him Draco. He wished he hadn’t. It sounded strange. "Could you do me a favour?" Potter had the nerve to bat his eyelashes.

"What?" Draco eyed Potter warily. However, wariness did not help him.

Potter hooked his leg behind Draco's knees, grabbed Draco's arm, and rolled them over effortlessly.

Draco realised what had happen only after he was lying on top of Potter, nestled snugly between his thighs. Potter's legs trapped him there, quickly.

"Stop talking and shag me." Potter smiled up at him. "It's what dreams like these are for."

Draco stared at him. Potter's expression was one of expectancy and excitement; his fervour did odd things to Draco's chest; his heart threatened to burst out of it. The fact that his crotch was pressed firmly to Potter's wasn't helping him think.

Potter wanted Draco to shag him.

That was crazy. Ridiculous. Wrong.

Tempting.

Very, very tempting. Though, until that very moment Draco had had no idea he wanted to shag Potter. But his mind was already full of images. Some of them were familiar; they were the product of Draco's wank-fantasises. He had indulged himself with thoughts like these sometimes, thoughts of having sex with a boy. Some other boy; a faceless, irrelevant boy. Not Potter. Perhaps merely a Potter look-alike. But those were just silly thoughts that popped into his mind while he wanked. They tended to give Draco spectacular orgasms.

But sweet Merlin, sex with a boy was one of his long-time fantasies. One that was utterly wrong and one he had tried so hard never to acknowledge. But the thought of doing it with Potter . . . it was too much to even contemplate. Draco's whole body seized up as though he was on a brink of an orgasm. The air in the cabin became unbearably hot as though someone had set it on fire while Draco wasn't looking.

Draco's gaze swept over Potter's face and his chest; in his mind, his gaze wandered even lower. He thought about wrapping his hand around Potter's cock, about spreading Potter's legs, about reaching behind Potter's balls and pushing his fingers . . .

Draco dragged his gaze back to Potter's eyes. They were filled with an earnest plea; a plea that was hard to resist.

How ridiculous. Felix Felicis was still working. It gave him what he had never dared to wish for — Potter. Potter, who hated him, but in that moment didn't even know it. Potter, who would hate him even more if Draco did as he asked.

Draco closed his eyes, his momentary elation dwindling. What was wrong with him? He had nearly killed Potter; he couldn't just pretend it never happened and shag him. Potter wouldn't have offered if he wasn’t delirious.

Trying not to take pleasure in the intimate contact with Potter's skin, Draco leaned down and grabbed Potter's face in his hands, determinedly looking into his green eyes. Potter gave a tiny gasp, his lips parting as he rose up a little, clearly expecting a kiss.

Draco's chest constricted as he shook his head. "No, Potter. I won't shag you. I know you don't believe me, but you're injured and you have to rest. Shagging is the last thing you need. Trust me, you'll thank me later." Draco winced. "Well, no, you probably won't."

Potter's expression fell the moment he realised there would be no kissing. Draco's words merely made him pout again.

"You won't shag me?" he asked as though Draco hadn’t been clear enough.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Potter pressed his lips together. "Fine, be that way," he said, looking resigned if slightly petulant.

Draco let out a slow breath of relief. That had been easy.

Too easy, Draco reflected as Potter's mouth stretched into a sly grin. In the next second, Potter moved and Draco was suddenly lying on his back with Potter on top of him, trapping Draco beneath his body.

"Then, I'll shag you," Potter proclaimed with a smile reminiscent of a kneazle that had just swallowed a Pygmy Puff.

"No, no, you won't!" Draco gasped, scandalised. For fuck's sake! Potter was injured, where was that agility coming from? Draco had to stop being indecisive and throw him off. Planning to do exactly that, Draco grabbed Potter's biceps and bucked upward. He almost succeeded, but Potter growled and cried, "Incarcerous!"

Draco nearly laughed at Potter's attempt to perform magic without a wand, but his laughter froze in his throat as his hands flew upward and cold manacles appeared around his wrists, binding him to the floor through the mattress. Shocked, Draco looked left and right at his bound hands, wondering if Potter had a point when he had claimed this whole thing was just a dream.

"You can't," Draco breathed. "You can’t do this wandlessly. It's impossible!" he said, pulling on the bonds in vain. They wouldn't budge.

Potter laughed. "You're so silly. Of course I can't." Potter shook his head and patted the silver bindings. "But I can do whatever the hell I want in my dream."

Draco stared at him. "It's not a dream, Potter. And this is impossible!" Though, technically wandless magic wasn't impossible, merely difficult. It signified power and lack of control. And Potter had both. His

conviction this was a dream must have worked in his favour.

It was not, however, working in Draco's favour. Hadn't he successfully managed to convince himself to do the right thing mere seconds ago? And now Potter strove to ruin Draco's very difficult moral sacrifice. That was completely unfair.

"Potter, release me."

"No." Potter leaned down. "Wait. Did you just say, 'Potter kiss me?' because then the answer is yes." Potter grabbed Draco's face between his hands.

"No, I said no such — mmph!"

Potter's lips pressed against his and Draco had to struggle not to give in and respond. The shock of his sudden imprisonment helped and he managed to resist the assault of Potter's lips and tongue. Potter grumbled, clearly displeased, but he comforted himself quickly by pressing numerous kisses all over Draco's face. He started out fast, which was annoying, but then he slowed down; his kisses turned gentle and lingering and his lips became softer and more supple, and Draco had to press his lips tightly together to stop himself from uttering sounds of approval. That became increasingly difficult when Potter moved lower to press sloppy, open-mouth kisses against the sensitive skin of Draco's neck. Potter's hands strayed downward, over Draco's stomach hips and thighs, caressing and rubbing as he sucked on Draco's neck, probably leaving marks.

Hazily, Draco realised he had fallen silent instead of screaming at Potter to get a grip on himself and stop violating his person. He rectified that mistake the moment he managed to make his throat work again.

"Potter." It sounded like moan and Draco cursed and tried again. "Potter! Stop it!"

"No," was Potter's short reply before he pressed his lips to Draco's left nipple.

Draco held his breath and then shuddered as Potter flicked his tongue over the sensitive flesh. His lips closed around it, sucking gently. It was perhaps a conscious decision on Draco's part to start complaining again only after Potter released his nipple.

As Potter moved to press a kiss to the middle of Draco's chest, Draco regained his breath and cried, "I mean it! Stop it, Potter! You do realise you're assaulting me? That's highly immoral. Not to mention illegal."

"Not if this is a dream." Potter pressed his lips to Draco's other nipple.

"And if it isn't?" Draco asked quickly, knowing he wouldn't be able to talk anymore if Potter began to suck again.

Potter barely raised his head; his lips caressed Draco's nipple as he spoke. "That's not very likely, is it?"

Beautiful suction made Draco fall silent again. He was thankful they had no pillows. He would be tempted to look down at Potter and that would have been highly distracting. This way, his neck hurt too much if he tried to watch and he was forced to stare at the rough cabin ceiling. When Potter moved downward, kissing and nibbling Draco's stomach, Draco tried to free himself from the manacles, but they wouldn't budge. Sweet Merlin, he couldn't just let Potter have his way with him. Though, if he did, then it wouldn't be his fault and Potter couldn't blame him.

"Hmm," Potter said as he reached Draco's hip and bit on it lightly. "You're much more muscular usually."

Draco glared at the ceiling.

"Though you don't taste half as good." Potter kissed Draco's hipbone, moving dangerously close to Draco's crotch, but then he moved up toward Draco's chest again. Draco almost cursed and complained, but he quickly shut his mouth and stayed silent. "And normally, you have scars," Potter added, licking and kissing Draco's chest. "They disappear if I kiss them."

Draco swallowed with difficulty. His throat was dry. "You dream about me often?" he asked, still staring at the ceiling. It was a difficult thought — that Potter dreamt about kissing Draco's scars away. It almost made him feel guilty for continuously mentioning them to Potter.

"No, rarely, actually."

"Oh."

"I fantasise about you often."

"Oh," Draco said again. That was unexpected. He thought Potter was merely randy and Draco was lucky. He thought Potter's dreams about him were something random and unwanted that assaulted Potter's mind. Fantasies, however, were a different matter. Draco's mind drifted toward yesterday.

"Were you . . . um —" Draco gasped as Potter's hands wrapped around his cock. The feeling was spectacular and utterly distracting. It took Draco awhile to assemble his thoughts. "Were you flirting with me in Defence, yesterday?"

Potter laughed. "I was trying to." Potter laughed even harder and Draco raised his head to glare at him. It was a mistake because the sight of Potter straddling Draco's thighs and gripping his cock was too much to bear. Potter had pushed the cloak and the blanket away; his nude body was on display and Draco's gaze fell on Potter's cock — so much more attention grabbing now that Potter was aroused. Draco's mouth watered.

"You were utterly adorable!" Potter exclaimed and Draco tore his gaze away from his cock to glare at him. "'I'll show you something in the forest tomorrow, Potter!'" Potter imitated before laughing again.

Potter might have as well poured cold water over him. Draco stared at him, wondering if Potter was even remotely aware how unfunny that was. Draco had shown him, hadn’t he? Just like he had promised. He

nearly murdered him, and though Potter didn't remember it now, he would once he recovered.

Potter was looking at him fondly, his hand moving up and down, squeezing Draco's cock and occasionally rubbing his thumb over the wet tip. It was nice, extremely nice, but Draco couldn't concentrate on anything except Potter's eyes. They were full of affection. And the worst thing was, Draco realised the affection wasn't new. Draco had seen it before, but he had never believed it. Potter had fantasised about him, wanted him, even flirted with him. And Draco had cursed him. He had ruined a chance he never knew existed. A chance he never knew he wanted, but now it seemed like the most important thing in the world. He might as well stare at Potter for as long as he could because it was the last time he would get to see those green eyes devoid of hatred. Even if, by some miracle, Draco escaped Azkaban, even if Potter cared for him enough to save him yet again . . . Draco had lost his chance forever.

"Untie me." The words were out of Draco's lips before he even made a conscious decision.

"Hmm." Potter scrunched up his nose as though thinking hard. He shook his head. "No."

"I changed my mind. I want to shag you. Untie me, Potter."

"It's all right." Potter nodded. "I don't mind shagging you." Green eyes danced, full of mirth. "Actually, I don't mind shagging you at all, especially while you're helpless and tied down."

"I want to touch you." Draco could hear the truth and the yearning in his own voice. He hoped Potter heard it, too. He wanted it more than anything and this was his only chance to get it.

The mirth disappeared from Potter's eyes. He bit his lip, looking uncertain.

"Please?" Draco said and as though the word really was magical the bonds disappeared.

Draco all but flew upward and Potter tensed, undoubtedly with another spell on his lips in the event

Draco tried to back out of shagging. But Draco had no such intention. Not exactly.

Draco reached out and cupped Potter's cheek, his other hand sneaking around Potter's waist. Potter was kneeling, looking alert and poised to strike, and Draco climbed on top of him and straddled his lap. Relaxing his rigid stance, Potter smiled, clearly pleased by the outcome. He leaned into Draco's touch, pressing his cheek to Draco's palm, reminding Draco again of a cat. Slowly, Draco leaned in and Potter leaned back, and their lips met in a gentle kiss. Draco moved his lips, his tongue darting out to explore the shape and fullness of Potter's mouth. Potter shivered and parted his lips, his hands flying to bury themselves into Draco's hair and pull him closer. It was strange to feel Potter's tongue move alongside his unhurriedly. Draco had expected their kiss would turn into a battle; that they would each try to dominate the other. But Potter seemed content with the slow, tentative exploration and Draco had no intention of breaking the tenderness of the moment. Potter tasted like potions, but sweet underneath the medicine-like flavour and Draco wanted more of that taste. He swiped his tongue over the roof of Potter's mouth, the backs of his teeth, then pulled back to taste Potter's lips again, trapping the bottom one between his teeth, licking and nibbling, before he lightly sucked on the tender flesh.

Potter moaned quietly and his hands moved downward, making goose bumps rise on the skin of Draco's back as gentle fingertips slowly reached his buttocks. The warm touch of Potter's palms on his arse dragged a low moan from Draco's throat and he deepened the kiss in the response as Potter cupped his behind and squeezed his arse cheeks, pulling Draco even closer to his body.

The kiss lasted forever, but it wasn't nearly long enough. Draco's lips tingled as he pressed another quick kiss to Potter's mouth, then moved to the side, kissing Potter's jaw. He liked the feeling of light stubble scratching his lips and he explored the unfamiliar sensation before he bent his head and pressed his mouth to the pulse point on Potter's neck. It beat strong and fast against Draco's lips and Draco closed his eyes, taking a moment to enjoy the feeling. Potter grew impatient; his fingers wandered between Draco's arse cheeks, stroking the tender skin in between, and then pressed against Draco's anus, tentatively exploring the furrowed skin and the tight muscles.

A violent shudder made Draco close his eyes and he pressed several urgent, sloppy kisses to Potter's neck, collarbone and shoulders; the skin there was soft and warm and so inviting it was hard to tear his mouth away, but Potter's fingers grew bolder and explored further. He pressed a finger into Draco's arse, the feeling new and strange, and Draco's limbs lost their strength. Trembling, he quickly reached behind to trap Potter's wrists and pull his hands away.

"Come on, lay down," Draco whispered, his voice so low he barely recognised it as his own.

Potter looked wary as Draco climbed off his lap and pulled Potter down to lie beside him, but he didn't say a word, simply stared at Draco with half-lidded eyes. Potter relaxed the moment Draco kissed him again, more passionately this time, unable to restrain himself. Potter's hands edged towards Draco's buttocks as though he couldn't stop himself from exploring and Draco grinned against Potter's lips before pulling away.

"You're extremely single-minded," he accused, still whispering.

Potter kneaded Draco's arse cheeks and grinned back, his face reddening.

"I spent so much time starring at it, I can't let the chance slip by me," he said and patted Draco's buttocks lightly, the affection of the action heart-wrenching. It almost felt like they were lovers.

Draco forced himself to smile. "Funny. That's my philosophy, too."

Potter cocked his head at him and Draco pressed another fast, sloppy kiss to his lips. With a low moan, he pulled away and moved his mouth downward, never separating his lips from Potter's skin.

The truth was Draco liked sex to be fast and dirty. That was how it always was when he had been with girls and that was how he had always imagined it when he had fantasised about boys. He wasn't sentimental and though he liked kissing, it was merely a means to an end. The end being a quick, hard shag.

But this was different.

This was his first and last opportunity to have Potter beneath him, willing and ready to do whatever Draco wished him to. The chance would never present itself again. He had to take all that he could, though he was well aware there were some things he couldn't accept from Potter. His conscience was

guilty enough. But what seemed imperative was to kiss and touch every part of Potter and commit every feeling, every gasp and every shiver to memory.

Draco took his time, trailing kisses over Potter's neck and shoulders, his chest and stomach. His tongue paused to swirl over Potter's nipples, to lick the sweat off Potter's stomach, to dip into Potter's navel and to trace the line of hair that led toward Potter's cock. His lips traced the curve of Potter's hips, his teeth nibbled on the soft skin; he buried his nose into the coarse, dark hair of Potter's crotch and inhaled Potter's musky scent. He licked and kissed Potter's thighs; the skin there was warm, sweaty and soft and Draco found it hard to separate his mouth from it. He pulled Potter's sacks into his mouth, one after the other, sucking on them gently. He took hold of Potter's cock and tasted the wetness that had gathered on the tip. The bitter taste didn’t stop him from pulling the head of Potter's cock into his mouth, licking and sucking as though it was the best thing he had ever tasted, even though it wasn't. Draco kissed and licked and nibbled and sucked until his lips felt achy and raw.

Potter was undone. He writhed and squirmed on the bed, begging and moaning continuously. Draco paused occasionally to stare at Potter's sweaty, nude body bathed by the golden firelight. Potter thrashed around, moaning and gasping for air, unable to keep still. His skin must have been overly sensitised, because he shuddered violently at Draco's every kiss and caress. It was fascinating to watch. No one had ever reacted so sensually to Draco's touch before; he had never turned another human begin into such a desperate mass of pure need; though, really, he had never bothered to achieve such a thing.

Releasing Potter's cock and leaving it spit-slicked and seemingly quivering in the soft light, Draco's tongue sneaked lower, edging behind Potter's balls, toward the furrowed, heated skin of Potter's anus.

Potter's reaction was instantaneous. His body convulsed and he shouted Draco's name, sounding half-shocked and half-scandalised. Draco nearly pulled back, thinking he had crossed some line, but Potter spread his legs wider and then stilled as though fearfully expecting more. Draco obliged and pressed his mouth to Potter's entrance, spurred on not by the action itself, which was dirty and wrong, but by Potter's pathetic whimpers and helpless shivers. The wrinkled skin and the tight muscle loosened as Potter relaxed, becoming boneless and looking as though he was lost in his pleasure, and Draco wriggled his tongue into Potter's hole, heedless of the spit that dribbled over his chin as he tongued Potter messily.

Potter's breathing sped up and he clenched around Draco's tongue. Draco quickly pulled away, not willing to let Potter come just yet. Potter whined, but Draco ignored his pleas. He absentmindedly wiped

his chin and mouth with the back of his hand and then rose up and settled between Potter's thighs again. He sprawled on top of Potter and looked down at his wide green eyes. Potter was flushed and sweaty, panting heavily as he stared at Draco in wonder.

Busy contemplating whether Potter would push him away if he tried to kiss him with his dirty mouth, Draco's breath was stolen from him as Potter grabbed his head and pulled him down sharply to crash their mouths together in a heated kiss. Moaning ceaselessly, Potter didn't stop kissing him until Draco felt dizzy and breathless. Even after Potter loosened his dead grip on Draco's hair and let Draco lift his head a little, he didn't stop showering kisses over Draco's mouth and jaw.

"The paste," Potter gasped between kisses. "We can use it instead of lube."

Draco slid his lips over Potter's, shaking his head. "No, we won't need lube," he said firmly as Potter frowned at him, looking betrayed.

Pressing another long kiss to Potter's lips, Draco smiled at him, moved a little to the right and reached down to grasp their cocks and align them together. Potter's hips twitched upward as his frown disappeared and Draco pressed down and moved. He closed his eyes as his cock slid against Potter's, but then quickly opened them again as Potter made a needy, lustful sound.

"Not shagging," Potter breathed, though he didn't sound too distressed.

"It will do." Draco smiled and rolled his hips, moving leisurely on top of Potter.

Potter's hands reached down and he grabbed Draco's buttocks, pulling him closer as his legs trapped Draco's thighs. Draco struggled to keep his eyes open so he wouldn't miss a single second of Potter's pleasure, but it was difficult not to close them and lose himself in the beauty of the moment. Their bodies were slicked with sweat and they moved against each other easily, chest against chest and cock against cock, speeding up with every slide. His eyelashes fluttering, Draco bent down and fastened his lips to Potter's in a desperate, awkward kiss, never breaking their ever-increasing pace. Draco's world spun and he struggled to keep his bearings as Potter shuddered beneath him and bucked upward, frantically moving his hips and squeezing Draco's arse so hard it almost hurt. Draco swallowed Potter's screams and then increased his pace, rutting against him mindlessly until his vision turned white and his

body shuddered under the onslaught of pleasure.

He could not stop moving; not even remotely embarrassed about the sloppy, wet sounds their bodies made as they slid against each other. All too soon, the pleasant shudders subsided and Potter whimpered beneath him. Draco forced his body to still and then he buried his head in the crook of Potter's neck, trying to calm his breathing and his hammering heart.

After a couple of long moments, Draco raised his head and looked down at Potter. His face still flushed and sweaty, Potter stared at him with a deep frown and questions in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" Draco asked in an odd scratchy voice. He cleared his throat and bit his lip. Potter's gaze searched his face.

"This doesn't feel like a dream anymore." Potter raised his hand and trailed his fingers over Draco's cheek and jaw.

"It's a dream, Potter. Trust me. This never happened."

Potter still looked troubled. "You're not like this in my dreams. You're more . . . angry." Potter squinted at him then shook his head. "This was a frighteningly sappy dream. I must have eaten something strange yesterday."

Eager to make Potter stop thinking about this further, Draco kissed him again. Potter gasped a little, but then melted into the kiss. He felt boneless in Draco's arms; his movements slowed and Draco reluctantly pulled back. He remembered Potter was unwell and he had to rest.

Ignoring Potter's half-hearted complaints, Draco rose up and reached for the cloth. After he had cleaned their sticky bodies as well as he could, he lay down next to Potter, pulling the blanket over them. Pressing a quick kiss to Potter's lips and grinning at Potter's bemused expression, Draco all but wrapped himself over Potter's body, lowering his head to Potter's warm chest.

Potter's laugh was one of disbelief. "Now what? Don't tell me you want to cuddle."

"Yes, I do, actually," Draco mumbled against Potter's chest. Who cared about dignity? They were in Potter's dream and that meant Draco could ask for every silly thing he wanted.

Potter chuckled, but he buried his hand in Draco's hair, combing through it gently with his fingers; his other hand stroked Draco's upper-arm that rested across Potter's chest. Draco closed his eyes and planned to take this moment with him to Azkaban.

"This ruined my fantasies forever, you know," Potter murmured. "I don't think I can wank thinking about cuddling."

"I don't think you'll ever think of me and wank again, Potter."

"I don't think I'll ever mange to not think of you. Especially now." Potter's voice lowered. "Draco, this was amaz —"

"Shhhh," Draco murmured. He trailed his fingers over Potter's chest. "Please, stop talking." No matter how wonderful Potter's enamoured statements were, it was difficult to hear them.

Potter yawned. "Oddball," he mumbled against Draco's hair, but fell silent.

Draco stared at the fire. If he wanted to keep it from dying out soon, he would have to get up and throw some more logs into the fireplace, but he had no intention of getting up while Potter's fingers were in his hair, stroking and toying with the strands.

All too soon, Potter's caresses slowed and then stopped. Potter's breathing deepened and Draco listened to the sound for a few minutes longer. It was not a bad time to break down and start crying, but his eyes

remained dry. Draco sighed and reluctantly got up.

He shivered as he walked around Potter and toward the fireplace. He worried that he had waited too long and the logs wouldn't catch fire. He stared at the fireplace and willed the fire to burn. He wondered if he should go back to sleep or maybe he should dress and look for help. He had no more excuses not to go. Potter was better; he no longer needed Draco's care, but Draco loathed the thought of leaving him.

However, Draco's dilemma was resolved quickly.

From a corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of bright blue light. He spun around, to look for the source, but he didn't have to look far.

Draco stared Potter's sleeping form. Inexplicably, Potter was glowing.

*

Two years ago, his father told him of the day when Arthur Weasley, accompanied by Aurors, appeared on his doorstep. They had apparently received an anonymous tip and were there to search Malfoy Manor for any incriminating evidence. They found nothing at all, but while they were searching his father's study, the tip of Weasley's wand glowed blue, indicating that the Locator Charm had found the very thing he had been looking for. The Aurors turned the room upside-down, but they had found absolutely nothing. In the end, they were forced to conclude that the Locator Charm was faulty. But it hadn't been. The charm had found cursed objects and lethal potions, but they were hidden in the room by the Dissimilis Charm.

It took Draco several minutes of panic to remember that story. After that, he allowed himself to breathe properly.

Potter was glowing because someone's Locator Charm had found them. And not only that, whoever had cast the Charm had to have been in the clearing. For all Draco knew, the person was standing right next to him, but they were unable to see each other because of the magical wards.

Draco found his discarded clothes and dressed with record speed, his mind working furiously. He hadn't thought about it before, but now that he did, it seemed obvious. Potter and he were missing for hours; it was not likely that the Hogwarts staff sat idly in the castle while Harry Potter was missing. They must have organised a search party, maybe even alerted the Auror Department. There were wizards and witches out there searching for their missing hero frantically.

With his hand on the knob, Draco looked back at Potter's glowing form. For a brief moment, he considered dressing Potter, but he'd had a valid reason for taking off his clothes; no one could blame him for that. Besides, Potter's trousers and shirt were still wet; it would do Potter no good if Draco forced him into his cold clothes.

Decision made, Draco returned to Potter's side and took his fur-lined cloak, then rushed to the door and stepped outside. The cold air and the dark shocked him. He had thought the enclosure was warm when he had first found it, but it felt freezing now. Draco quickly closed the door, worrying about Potter's naked form, protected only by a blanket.

It took a while for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Draco looked around, but he saw nothing but silent trees bathed in the shimmering golden light of the wards. That didn't necessarily mean no one was around. Whoever had found them could have been walking around in circles, confused by the findings of the Locator Charm. Draco's gaze fell on the glowing archway. If he wanted to be seen, he would have to step outside the magical enclosure. There was no other way.

Draco took a reluctant step towards the archway and then froze. A dark figure appeared before him out of nowhere.

The figure was cloaked and hooded; it was impossible to tell who it was.

Unnerved to have a stranger stand right in front of him, the two of them separated by the thin veil of magic, Draco became acutely aware he was unarmed. He stared at the wand in the mysterious person's hand; its tip glowed blue. The figure walked slowly, directing the wand left and right, undoubtedly measuring the strength of the light that changed with every wand movement. Only a few feet separated the figure from the large oak tree.

Draco's gaze scanned the ground and he picked up a large rock even before he had thought things through or made any sort of plan. But it occurred to him that whoever this was, it wasn't necessarily a member of a rescue party. Draco wasn't glowing; this person was looking for Potter and Potter alone. Draco knew that Potter was probably a priority, but there was another possibility. Though he was more than sure he was the one who had cursed Potter, it was still possible someone else was trying to murderer the Conqueror of the Dark Lord. Potter certainly had enemies and perhaps one of those enemies had come back to finish the job.

The figure moved closer to the tree.

Draco bit his lip. He had found the entrance to the cabin; someone else might find it, too. Clutching the large rock in his hand, Draco eyed the figure's glowing wand.

He couldn't take any chances. If the person was an enemy, Draco would be powerless to defend Potter and himself. Now was his only chance to do something. He needed that wand.

The figure stopped walking; the tree and the archway were right in front of it.

The magical wards didn't let anyone inside, but that didn't necessarily mean they wouldn't let anything outside. Draco raised his hand and narrowed his eyes at the motionless figure. Attack now and ask questions later seemed like a good tactic.

Not knowing whether the wards would allow it or not, Draco swung his hand and threw the rock as hard as he could, aiming directly at the figure's head. The wards shimmered as the rock whooshed through them and slammed against the dark, cloaked shape. The person didn't even have a chance to gasp, but instead collapsed instantly to the ground.

Grinning, with his gaze fixed firmly on the glowing wand, Draco rushed through the archway and then took two careful steps toward the immobile person lying on the frozen ground. He snatched the wand away and then, taking a deep breath, he removed the hood from the person's head.

Draco's gaze fell on the pale bloodied forehead and brown hair arranged into an elaborate bun. He stared, horrified.

It was quite possible he had just murdered Professor Eunice Merrythought.

IV.

The Belief

Luck is believing you're lucky.

~ Tennessee Williams

Albus Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled at him merrily. Draco had no idea why the old wizard looked so cheerful; he was dead, after all. Draco tore his gaze away from Dumbledore's portrait and focused on the Headmistress, who sat opposite Draco, behind her desk. Professor McGonagall's lips were pressed into a tight line, which was never a good omen.

"Is that all?" she asked curtly.

Draco nodded. He had told McGonagall everything he remembered. He told her about how he had

woken up without his memories, how he had used Felix Felicis and found the cabin, how he had given Potter healing potions and how he had warmed Potter up. He did, however, neglect to mention his original intentions for Felix Felicis, and he certainly didn't tell her what had happened during Potter's dream. As far as Draco was concerned, that would always remain just a dream.

McGonagall lips thinned even further; they all but disappeared from her face.

Draco winced. Now that he had told his tale, it sounded ridiculous to his own ears. If McGonagall didn't believe him, he couldn't blame her. And if she did believe him and nonetheless thought he was guilty, he couldn't blame her, either. Draco had worded his story carefully. He tried not to incriminate himself more than was strictly necessary, but he didn't know how to hint at his possible innocence when he didn't believe in it himself. It occurred to him he could have lied and said he remembered everything and claimed some mysterious cloaked figure had attacked them, but that would have been rather pointless once Potter woke up and told everyone what really happened.

McGonagall made a disapproving sort of grimace.

"Have a biscuit, Mr Malfoy."

Draco stared at her and then looked at her desk and the plateful of ginger biscuits.

"Go on, Mr Malfoy. You have been missing for hours. The kitchens are closed, I'm afraid. Have a biscuit." McGonagall pushed the plate closer to Draco.

The moment McGonagall said the word biscuit, Draco was starving. For a second, he wondered if McGonagall wanted to poison him, but his stomach growled and Draco quickly took a biscuit. He ate it in matter of seconds, eying McGonagall warily. Her behaviour had definitely been strange, though, Draco supposed, one could say the exact same thing about his behaviour.

Earlier, when he had knocked down Professor Merrythought, he had believed for full five minutes that she was behind everything that happened. However, after Merrythought regained consciousness, he realised she was merely a member of the search party. That hadn't calmed Draco down. She insisted on

seeing Potter, and Draco had no intention of letting Dirtythought anywhere near her favourite Saviour, who was at that moment defenceless and naked. Merrythought, in turn, thought that Draco was a vicious murderer, who had buried Potter's body somewhere in the clearing. By the time Slughorn and Hagrid appeared with the rest of the search party hot on their heels, both Draco and Merrythought had been in hysterics. Draco calmed down only after Madam Pomfrey arrived. She examined him quickly and shot a spell at him that made him sleepy and calm. Magically soothed, he showed her the entrance to the cabin and told her which potions he had used to heal Potter's injuries. Draco had refused to be separated from Potter, even while under the effects of Pomfrey's spell, but to his utter humiliation, Hagrid had picked him up and carried him to the castle. That had been awfully embarrassing, not to mention uncomfortable — Hagrid smelled funny.

Aurors greeted them when they arrived at the castle and they had accosted Draco immediately. However, McGonagall snapped at them, grabbed Draco and all but dragged him to her office. She left him there for a few long, terrifying minutes and then returned with the news of Potter's condition. Potter was asleep and Madam Pomfrey assured everyone he would be all right. Professor Merrythought had suffered a minor concussion, but she, too, would be fine. Draco was relieved, but still unnerved by McGonagall's behaviour. He wasn't sure why she had rescued him from the Aurors, but it was possible she merely planned to murder him herself.

Draco took another biscuit from the plate. If he would die, he wouldn't die hungry.

"Very well." McGonagall sighed. "I should tell you what we know. Your absence was not noted immediately, but once it was, some students had a rather emotional reaction. Pansy Parkinson insisted that Theodore Nott had something to do with your disappearance —"

"Did he?" Draco asked hopefully.

"He claims he did not. However, Miss Parkinson found Harry Potter's wand in his possession."

The room spun from the force of Draco's relief. "But then . . ." Then, I'm innocent. Draco stared at McGonagall in disbelief. If Nott had Potter's wand, he must have been the one who had cursed him. "Did he curse Potter? Did he confess?"

McGonagall pursed her lips. "I'm afraid not. He told us he had found the two of you fighting in the forest and in the heat of the argument you shot a curse at Potter. As Potter fell, you noticed Nott watching and tried to curse him, as well. Nott claims he managed to Stun you. He says your wand broke when you fell and he took Potter's so you would be unarmed if you woke up."

Doubt assaulted Draco's mind again. "That's ridiculous," he insisted. "Why didn't he tell anybody about the incident?"

"He says he panicked and thought everyone would think he was involved if he mentioned he was there."

Draco shook his head, utterly confused. Nott's involvement gave him hope. The possibility that Nott was responsible for Potter's near death was more than Draco could hope for. However, Draco had dismissed Nott as a suspect for a reason. Nott was a lot of things, but he wasn't stupid. He couldn't have possibly thought he could curse Potter and get away with it by pinning the murder on Draco. The fact that he had kept Potter's wand proved that Nott panicked and acted on impulse. It was possible he was actually telling the truth. If he had stumbled upon them as Potter and Draco fought, what would Nott have done? He hated them both. Not telling anyone anything about the incident was something Nott would definitely do; he would not wish to implicate himself. And Draco thought he knew why Nott couldn't resist the temptation of taking Potter's wand. Rumour was that Potter carried the Elder Wand around; Draco doubted it, but many believed it to be true.

"Mr Malfoy," McGonagall said and Draco looked at her. She gave him a small smile. "I do believe he's lying."

"You do?" Draco asked before he could stop himself. "But I don't remember what happened. . ." Draco quickly pressed his lips together. What was wrong with him? No matter what happened in the forest, if McGonagall or anyone else wanted to think Nott was the one responsible, Draco might as well encourage them. Nonetheless, guilt threatened to consume him and Draco fought to push the feeling away.

"Indeed. And that is why I do not believe a word Mr Nott says."

"You don't?" Draco whispered. "You believe me? Why?"

McGonagall's eyes softened; Draco had never seen her look so kindly. "Mr Malfoy, you have done nothing wrong," she said gently.

And there it was. Draco had tried to cry several times that day, but he hadn’t managed. And now his vision finally blurred. He had no idea why McGonagall chose to believe him, but Draco didn't deserve it. He wiped his eyes angrily and glared at McGonagall. Words ran out of his mouth before he could stop them. "You don't understand. Nott wouldn't be that stupid. Not unless he really had panicked. And fighting with Potter sounds like something I would do. I even thought about . . . Yesterday I even considered the possibility . . ."

"Yes, I heard about the incident in the Defence class. Nott graced me with the story." McGonagall shook her head. "I knew that letting you speak to the Aurors would be a dreadful idea at this point. Mr Malfoy, you have been through a terrible ordeal. You are not thinking straight."

"But I might have been the one . . ."

"Listen to me. You have gone to extraordinary lengths in order to — successfully — save Mr Potter's life — and before I continue, allow me to thank you."

Draco winced. "I thought I cursed him. I couldn't let him die. I was just protecting myself —"

"However," McGonagall talked over him, "you couldn't tell Madam Pomfrey which curse was used on Potter, even though, by your own logic, that would have helped save both of you."

"Because I don't remember —"

"And Madam Pomfrey tells me you suffered no serious injuries; therefore, your amnesia remains

unexplained."

"I'm not lying about that," Draco said quickly.

"No, you are not. I'm trying to explain why I believe you. You seemed quite shocked when I mentioned Mr Nott, and if you were less eager to take the blame for what happened in the forest, I'd suspect you were merely trying to conceal the presence of a witness, but this way, I have no other choice but to believe you were Obliviated. And no one would have done so unless they were trying to hide an incriminating truth."

Draco thought about that carefully. He must have been Obliviated. But . . . "Nott could have Obliviated me so his presence would remain undetected in case I tried to shift the blame to him. It doesn't mean . . ." Draco fell silent as McGonagall rubbed her temples.

"Why would Nott worry about such a thing, when a simple Priori Incantatem performed on your wand would incriminate you?"

"Priori Incantatem!" Draco gasped. "Have you inspected Nott's wand?"

"Headmistress!" one of the portraits cried. "There are quite a few people waiting for you outside. The Aurors wish to speak to Mr Malfoy. They are rather insistent."

Draco tensed.

"In a minute," McGonagall told the portrait and stood up. She addressed Draco again. "I'm afraid that neither Nott's nor Mr Potter's wands were used to cast any sort of curse or a Memory Charm. I assume your wand was used to cast these spells."

Great, Draco thought. That certainly didn't make him feel any less guilty.

"Which is why I will not have you speak to the Aurors until Mr Potter wakes up and tells us exactly what happened."

"And if he doesn't remember, either? I asked him, but he just said it wasn't werewolves . . ." Draco blinked. He remembered asking Potter whether he thought the werewolves had attacked them and Potter had said, "No, not, not werewolves." Could it be that Potter meant to say Nott?

Draco dared to feel hopeful again. "I think Potter said something about Nott, but he was delirious and I wasn't paying attention."

"Too busy feeling guilty?"

Draco looked up at McGonagall. The corner of her mouth twitched and she pointed at the plate on her desk. "They won't eat themselves, Mr Malfoy." She walked to door and added over her shoulder, "Wait here."

The moment she left, Draco grabbed the plate and all but devoured the biscuits. He felt better after the plate was empty, and after he replayed Potter's answer about who had attacked them in his mind. He had been so sure he had cursed Potter, it was hard to accept the possibly he was innocent. Well, he wasn't completely innocent; he had taken advantage of Potter while Potter was delirious. Guilt refused to leave Draco alone.

"I have been wrong about many things in my life," one of the portraits said. Draco didn't have to look up to see who it was. "But I'm glad I was not wrong about you, Mr Malfoy. You are not and never will be a murderer."

Draco looked up at Dumbledore reluctantly. "It's still possible I cursed Potter," he argued.

"The severity of the curse tells me you did not. A person capable of such dark magic would have run away, never mention the incident, and hope Harry would die — just as Mr Nott did. The thought of

simply running away did not seem to occur to you."

Draco stared at him, not sure how he had earned Dumbledore's and McGonagall's trust without even trying.

The office door opened and Draco looked around, fearfully expecting the Aurors had come to take him away. However, the wizard that entered did not look like an Auror. He wore a bright green travelling cloak and a pair of high boots. His sandy hair was long but not as long as his beard. He smiled pleasantly at Draco and raised his hands in defence.

"Minnie said I can come up here." The wizard grinned, showing a row of white teeth and Draco suddenly recognised him.

"Mr Borage!" Draco exclaimed and stood up quickly.

"Oh, please, do sit down." Merwyn Borage hurried forward, shook Draco's hand and urged him to sit back down. Draco sat mutely, hardly able to believe that Merwyn Borage, the famous Potions master, had randomly appeared at Hogwarts.

And had referred to Professor McGonagall as Minnie.

"I've been told you had quite an exhausting day," Borage continued as he Conjured a chair and sat opposite Draco, staring at him with much too much interest. "I know you are tired, but I simply had to meet you." Borage smiled at him fondly.

Draco wondered if Potter had a point when he had claimed this whole thing was a strange dream. The day simply could not become any stranger.

"Um, why?" Draco asked.

"Oh, forgive me. You must think I'm barmy."

Draco lied and quickly shook his head. Barmy or not, it was Merwyn Borage and Draco had no intention of insulting him.

"Oh, he's tactful, too, I see." Borage laughed. "Let me explain. I was at home, enjoying a glass of wine and a peaceful evening when the alarms went off, informing me that someone had broken into my storage room. My very secret storage room, if I might add."

"The cabin!" Draco gasped. "It's yours."

"Indeed. I thought nothing of it, but then a friend at the Ministry Floo-called and told me a Hogwarts student had found the cabin, broke inside and used my potions to save the life of Harry Potter. Needless to say, I thought my poor friend was drunk and babbling nonsense, but I went to investigate, nonetheless. Well . . ." Borage shook his head. "I suppose my secret cabin is no longer a secret."

Draco cringed. "I am so very sorry . . ."

Borage's brown eyes widened. "No, please. There's no need to apologise. The cabin is just a place where I like to work in peace and the Forbidden Forest is such a splendid source of ingredients. Quite handy, you see. Oh, but that hardly matters." Borage waved his hand dismissively. "Potions intended for healing are my passion. To know that my cabin helped save a life is more than I could ask for." Borage cocked his head. "I am curious to know exactly how you found the cabin. I thought my hiding place was awfully clever."

"It was!" Draco said quickly. "I just got lucky."

Borage's eyebrows rose. "Quite lucky."

"Er. . ." Draco hesitated. There was a voice in his head that kept telling him not to mention Felix Felicis. He couldn’t help listening to it. "A Jobberknoll flew into the barrier and died, so I knew something was there. See? Pure luck."

"I think not. It happens all the time. The top barrier is a splendid trap. More than one bird has met that fate. I denude and hide the bodies." Borage winked and then, as though he was worried that he sounded deranged, he coughed and added, "I have a permit for that cabin."

Draco nodded mutely.

"Now, what I want to know, Mr Malfoy . . . I had the opportunity to talk to the lovely Madam Pomfrey and examine Mr Potter earlier —"

"Is he all right?" Draco asked quickly.

"Oh yes!" Borage beamed. "We expect he'll be fully recovered by tomorrow. Monday at the latest. Which, I must say, is shocking, since he was hit by the Entrail-expelling Curse and didn't receive immediate medical attention."

Draco stopped listening. "Entrail-expelling Curse," he echoed. That had to have meant Nott had cast it; it was too big of a coincidence that Potter was hit by the same curse that had killed Nott's father. "But isn't that curse virtually undetectable? Especially after some time has passed?"

Borage inclined his head. "You are correct. It also actually expels ones entrails, which obviously did not happen to Mr Potter. I'm fairly certain that the curse was blocked. By a Shield Charm, I imagine. It could not deflect the curse entirely, but it certainly helped. "

Draco frowned. If the curse was deflected, then Potter and Nott must have duelled.

"The damage was, nonetheless, severe," Borage continued. "However, the potions you applied not only saved Mr Potter's life, but also repaired the damage; he will suffer no consequences. The combination you gave him was rather inspired. How on earth did you think of it?"

Draco looked at Borage's bright brown eyes. Borage looked truly impressed.

"I got lucky," Draco mumbled. For fuck's sake! Borage thought Draco was some sort of genius, but he didn't know about the Felix Felicis and Draco just couldn't bring himself to tell him.

"So modest!" Borage laughed.

"No, really. I was just guessing."

Borage shook his shaggy head, still laughing. "My dear boy, luck is ever-present in potion making. I'll tell you what's lucky. It's lucky to have too much to drink and fall asleep at your desk without noticing your Jobberknolls feathers have fallen into your glass of Firewhiskey. It's also lucky if you're too lazy to go out to buy fresh feathers, but simply use the ones you have. And it's lucky to discover that didn't hurt your potion at all but improved it." Borage winked. "That is luck. But a corner of your mind knows how the ingredients react to each other and in the end, you know you were lucky because you dared to follow your intuition."

"Really?" Draco asked, hopeful.

"Yes!" Borage said, but then frowned. "Well, either that or you drank a bottle of Felix Felicis and you really did get lucky." Borage laughed.

Draco looked at his feet.

"Oh dear." Borage gasped and Draco thought he had figured out how Draco got so lucky, but Borage sounded concerned. "You're tired and I'm interrogating you. Where are my manners? Here . . ." He reached into his pocket and took out a small silver item. "This is for you," he said and handed Draco some sort of card made of metal with Borage's name and address written on it. "Feel free to owl me, Mr Malfoy, whenever you wish to discuss potions. Or breaking and entering techniques." Borage laughed. "And . . ." he cleared his throat and fell silent. Draco quickly looked up at him. Eye-contact must have been what Borage wanted, because he continued promptly, "Be sure to contact me after you pass your N.E.W.T.s." Borage winked and stood up.

Draco looked at the card again in disbelief. Apparently, he had just been offered a job. And not just any job. Working with Borage was no small matter. Draco swallowed. Merlin, was the Felix Felicis still working?

Draco stood up and shook Borage's hand, feeling terribly uncomfortable. How could he let Borage think he was a genius? The man would realise he wasn't, eventually. Draco opened his mouth, the confession on the tip of his tongue, but McGonagall burst into the office and Borage directed his gaze at her. She smiled and nodded at Borage and then addressed Draco.

"The Aurors have arrested Mr Nott. You may go to your dormitory and rest."

"Did Nott confess?" Draco asked.

"No, he did not. He had possession of Harry's wand, however, and he was arrested for theft. The Aurors will return to question Mr Potter when he wakes up."

"So Potter will definitely be all right?"

Borage gave a heavy sigh. "He doesn't believe a word I say."

"I know the feeling." McGonagall shook her head.

"No, it's not that," Draco said quickly. "I just . . ."

"He has no faith in his abilities," Borage finished for him. "I just informed him his ingenuity saved Mr Potter's life and he tells me it was mere luck. Really now."

Draco closed his eyes and looked at his feet. He had told McGonagall about the Felix Felicis. He guessed his career as a potion maker was over before it even began.

"I'm surprised by his modesty," was McGonagall's unexpected answer. "Mr Malfoy has always been one of our finest potion students. Is that not true, Albus?"

"Quite true!" Dumbledore's portrait agreed promptly. "I believe Mr Potter has been the lucky one today."

Draco still stared at his feet, not believing his ears.

"Off you go, Mr Malfoy, before you fall asleep in my office," McGonagall chastised.

Draco's legs moved on their own and he walked to the door. He gave one furtive glance to McGonagall and Borage. They both smiled and Draco mumbled a thank you before he rushed out of the office.

Once he was alone, standing on the circular staircase, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His mind was working furiously, but he couldn't form a single coherent thought. He couldn't wait for the day to be over.

He headed to his dormitory with his hands in his pocket. Instead of thinking about something productive, he thought about Potter. He wondered if McGonagall would be so kind if she knew what Draco had done with the Wizarding World's hero in the cabin. Once Potter woke up, who knew what he would remember

and how much he would say?

A silly thought passed through Draco's mind. If Nott was responsible for the curse, and Draco was innocent, perhaps Potter would still want him. Or perhaps he would hate him, anyway, because Draco had violated him.

Draco was sure about one thing, Felix Felicis would definitely stop working tomorrow and Draco would be on his own.

Draco's fingers wrapped around Potter's broken glasses; they were still in his pocket. Absentmindedly, he decided to keep them.

*

Sunday was not a good day. Draco hadn't slept well and when he dragged himself to the common room he was assaulted by questions. There had been a time Draco would have enjoyed the attention, but now he had no wish to talk to anyone. After providing everyone with an abbreviated version of the events ("We were attacked, we were lost, we were found, now leave me the fuck alone!") Draco had fled to his dormitory and decided to remain hidden. Pansy had smuggled him some food, but she had demanded the full tale in return. Draco figured he owed her for uncovering Nott's involvement, so he provided her with more details. She bemoaned the fact that Felix Felicis had been wasted on saving Potter's life and Draco found himself resenting her for it. Of course, he had not mentioned what had transpired in the cabin, but quickly changed the subject and bragged about his unexpected job offer. Unfortunately, Pansy, who had no idea who Merwyn Borage was, even though Draco had mentioned him countless times, remained unimpressed.

Draco had written to his parents and given them the same version of events he had told his classmates (although, he had left out the 'leave me the fuck alone' part). He didn't want to give his parents too much detail before he knew for certain he was innocent. No one came to arrest him and no one came to

tell him what happened, but Blaise did mention he had overheard Granger telling Longbottom that Potter was still asleep in the hospital wing.

Monday started out much more promising. Draco had no classes in the morning, so he slept in, which was fortunate, since he didn't get any sleep that night. He couldn't stop dreaming about Potter. In his dreams, Potter stood before him, smiling widely with affection in his eyes, and Draco stared at him, not knowing whether he should curse him or kiss him. Each time, Draco would wake up, drenched in sweat, without ever making a decision.

Draco had just showered and pulled on his pants when Pansy burst into the dormitory.

"Are you decent?" she asked sheepishly after she noticed he was not.

"Rarely, if ever," Draco grumbled and pulled on his trousers and shirt.

Pansy watched him dress with interest and she only snapped out of her daze when Draco cleared his throat.

"Oh!" She jumped a little. "You'll never guess what happened."

"I won't bother, then."

Draco gathered the books and parchment for his classes, purposely ignoring Pansy, knowing it would make her talk faster.

Sure enough, Pansy crumbled. "Oh, all right, I'll tell you. The Aurors arrived during breakfast and —"

Draco dropped the book he'd been holding and turned toward Pansy sharply. He half-expected the

Aurors to burst into the dormitory.

"— they arrested Derwent Harper!"

Draco frowned. "For what? Stupidity? Is that a crime these days?"

"Apparently!" Pansy exclaimed. "Daphne heard a part of his conversation with the Aurors. Mind you, we all heard him screech about his innocence. He was trying to convince them he had no idea what Nott planned to do, but Daphne says they didn't believe him."

"They think he was involved?" Harper was partnered with Nott for the feather-hunt, but Draco couldn't fathom why Harper would wish to harm either him or Potter.

"Clearly. They arrested him and took him away."

"They left?" Draco still found it hard to believe the Aurors hadn't insisted on at least talking to him.

Pansy nodded. "Harper was hysterical. It was quite a show. You should be sorry you missed it."

His knees giving out, Draco dropped onto his bed. "What have I ever done to Harper?"

"Well, Daphne's sister — she's on good terms with Harper — said Harper bragged about ordering a new racing broom, even though he had complained he was broke a mere couple of days ago." Pansy gave Draco a pointed look.

"You think Nott paid Harper to help him?" Draco asked, incredulous. "But Nott's poor."

"Oh, don't be daft, Draco. Harper is an idiot. I don't think Nott paid him in advance. He probably never planned to give Harper a Knut. Maybe he planned to Obliviate the poor fool, too."

Draco toyed with the tie on his bag. Harper was an idiot, but Nott was not. This was yet another thing Nott had screwed up. He should have Obliviated Harper. What kind of a half-arsed plan did Nott concoct? And he did plan everything in advance since he had made sure he had Derwent Harper's back-up. What the hell had happened in the forest? It looked like Nott ran away in mindless terror as quickly as he could.

"Did Nott confess?" Draco asked.

Pansy snorted. "I doubt it."

Draco looked at her sharply. "But that means Potter is awake! Why didn't you tell me? I told you to tell me the minute you heard —"

"But, Draco!" Pansy gasped. "I thought you just wanted to know what happened. And now you do. What does it matter if Potter is awake or not? He told the Aurors his story and you clearly weren't involved."

Draco was barely listening. "I want Potter to tell me exactly what happened," he said, pulling on his Hogwarts robe. He had to find Potter and talk to him. He needed Potter to tell him everything he remembered.

"Draco, we have Transfiguration now . . ."

"I don't have a wand, anyway, do I?" Draco snapped, grabbed his bag and headed toward the door.

"Wait. You do, I suspect." Pansy quickly pulled out a package from her bag. "This arrived for you. It's from your mother."

Draco snatched the package from Pansy's outstretched hand and quickly scanned the note attached. His mother had sent him her wand with a promise that they would buy him a new one over the Christmas holidays. The note was full of questions and concern and Draco quickly shoved it into his pocket to deal with it later.

A quick look at Pansy told him her feelings were dangerously injured. With a sigh, Draco walked over and rudely poked her in the ribs.

She winced and glared at him, but stopped pouting when he smiled at her and said, "Thanks, Pansy."

As he rushed out of the room, she yelled after him, "You're completely mental!"

Draco hurried to the hospital wing; Potter was the only thing on his mind. Several students called his name as he passed through the common room and the hallways, but Draco ignored all of them. He was already in front of the hospital wing door when he lost his nerve.

It occurred to him suddenly that Potter might remember too much. If Potter realised his dream hadn't been a dream, Draco could be the last person he wanted to see.

Draco looked at the closed doors longingly. He had no idea how long he stood there, staring at them, but after he had already decided to leave, the doors swung open. Irrationally, Draco expected Potter to appear, but of course, it wasn't Potter who exited. It was Granger and Weasley.

They spotted him immediately. Weasley froze and Granger cried, "Malfoy!" looking at him as though she had never seen him before in her life.

Draco made a jerky gesture with his head that could have been interpreted as a nod.

"Are you . . .?" Granger looked at Weasley as though asking for help. Weasley just stared at Draco with wide blue eyes. "Er, are you here to see Harry?" Granger asked at last. She moved a little from the door as though to let him pass.

"Um," was all Draco managed to say. He wanted to see Potter more than anything, but it seemed wiser to just turn around and leave.

"He probably wants to see you," Weasley said suddenly. He looked as though he could hardly believe his own words.

"I was just passing through." Draco shrugged. "On my way to Transfiguration."

"Oh." Granger pursed her lips and added, "We have Transfiguration, too."

Draco sighed inwardly. He had a crazy urge to say, "Nice weather we're having." Honestly, why was he suddenly having an inane conversation with Granger and Weasley?

"Harry will be here the whole day. If you want to stop by later," Granger said, trying to make her suggestion sound unobtrusive, but she failed at it miserably. Draco felt like he had just been given an order. It made him want to be contrary.

Draco uttered a noncommittal sound and turned around, eager to leave.

Granger and Weasley fell into step with him.

"You know, Malfoy," Granger began tentatively. "Harry told us what happened in the forest and I just wanted to say what you did was really amaz —"

"I forgot my quill!" Draco exclaimed and turned around sharply.

"The Slytherin common room is that way!" Weasley yelled helpfully as Draco ran away in the wrong direction.

Draco only ran faster. Granger's expression reminded him of McGonagall, and he suspected Granger planned to praise him and thank him for saving Potter’s life. He didn't wish to hear it. Everything he did, he did to save his own skin. No one owed him a thing. He just wanted to be left alone.

However, it was not to be. The day turned steadily worse. Students stared at him ceaselessly and approached him at random, trying to extract information. Draco ignored them all and eventfully they gave up and tried to interrogate Weasley and Granger, who shared the story much more freely than Draco, though they, too, were beginning to lose patience.

Draco had ended up in front of the hospital wing several times during the day, but he couldn't gather the courage to walk inside. Judging by Granger's and Weasley's behaviour, Potter hadn't said anything incriminating, but that didn't mean Potter wouldn't try to question Draco about what had transpired in the cabin, and Draco did not wish to discuss it.

His chance to speak to Potter arrived Tuesday evening. Draco finished dinner and managed to slip out of the Great Hall unnoticed. But then, out of nowhere, Potter called out Draco's name. Not expecting to see Potter walking around already, Draco panicked and quickly ducked into the nearest deserted corridor.

"Malfoy, wait! I have something for you!" Potter cried when Draco almost reached the end of the corridor, heading toward the dungeons.

Too curious to resist, Draco paused and turned. Potter was running toward him and Draco almost snapped and chastised the idiot. What was Potter thinking? Running like that after barely surviving a vicious curse.

"You're difficult to find," Potter accused when he reached Draco. He was slightly out of breath.

Draco's gaze raked over Potter's features. There was colour in his cheeks and his eyes looked bright and clear. He seemed perfectly healthy. He wore a pair of new glasses with thin frames that suited him so well they actually made him look distinguished instead of dopey. It made Draco feel better about the fact he had kept Potter's old glasses, though he had yet to figure out why he had done such a thing. He had fixed them and then stared them for a long time in his bed yesterday.

Potter smiled at him.

"Did you need something?" Draco asked curtly.

Potter's smile wavered, but then he quickly ducked his head and reached into his pocket. In the next second he pointed his wand at Draco.

For a moment, Draco was positive Potter would hex him, but then his gaze fell downward and he realised the wand wasn't Potter's. Draco stared at it in wonder before he slowly reached out to hold it in his hand. The warmth of the wood in his grip was familiar.

"That's impossible," he whispered, utterly fascinated.

"The Aurors found it in the cabin. I asked them to bring it to me."

Draco shook his head and tore his gaze from his perfectly undamaged wand and looked at Potter's beaming expression. "It was destroyed," Draco said. "It was broken and half-burned." It was simply impossible, but it was definitely Draco's wand. Draco would recognise it anywhere.

"Well . . ." Potter grinned. "I had it fixed."

"It couldn't have been fixed."

Potter shrugged. "And yet here it is."

Draco stared at him. "Will you tell me how you managed it?"

"No," Potter said firmly, then bit his lip. "It's the least I could do after all you did for me."

Draco cringed. All this fucking praise was making him uncomfortable. Potter's eyes were warm; that emotion Draco had seen in them back at the cabin hadn't disappeared. Draco looked away quickly.

"Everything I did, I did for myself, and most of it was pure luck," he said sharply. He glanced at Potter in time to see his green eyes darken; Potter actually looked disappointed.

Draco looked away again. "So you remember everything that happened?" he asked a little too quietly, but Potter heard him.

"Oh, yes!" Potter said, but fell silent.

Draco glared at him. "Well? Care to share?"

Potter shoved his hands into his pockets, looking faintly amused. "I'm surprised you didn't seek me out to interrogate me the moment I woke up. McGonagall tells me you were positive you cursed me." Potter's tone suggested he thought the notion was ridiculous.

"Well, I'm not the one who was arrested, so I figured it wasn't me." Draco summoned his patience and looked at Potter, waiting.

"Right." Potter nodded a bit resignedly. He took a deep breath and began his tale, which was annoyingly

lacking in details. "We were fighting, I said some things and you punched me . . ."

"I did? What did you say?" Draco asked, not pleased with the beginning of the story in the slightest.

Potter smiled sheepishly. "Nothing relevant. I'm glad you don't remember anything. Anyway," Potter added quickly as Draco opened his mouth to insist on knowing exactly why they were fighting. Draco let it go as Potter continued. "We were distracted and Nott and Harper ambushed us and Disarmed us — way too easily, I might add." Potter sighed a little. "They marched us into the woods, away from everyone else. It was a long walk and Nott kept talking the whole time. About Voldemort, about how you and your family are traitors, about his father's death and his mother's insanity. He was enraged."

"I don't know why," Draco said petulantly. "His anger is completely unjustified."

"Oh, no. His anger is completely justified."

Draco looked at Potter sharply.

"Merely misdirected," Potter added gently. "I'm not sure how much you know, but apparently after your father and Nott were pulled out of Azkaban, Voldemort was still furious at them for losing the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries. And at roughly the same time you had failed in your mission to kill Dumbledore."

Draco looked at his feet.

"Voldemort tortured both of them. And in his rage he cursed Nott, to show your father what would happen to him if he failed him again. Nott's death was pointless. It was merely used to teach your father a lesson."

"That's not my father's fault," Draco said quietly. "He simply had more Galleons and more connections.

The Dark Lord cared about Nott's allegiance a lot less. Or not at all."

"Of course, I know that. And I'm glad you know whose fault it is. Nott doesn't blame Voldemort for anything. His mother lost her mind watching her husband die in agony, but both she and her son blame your father and not Voldemort. And Nott hates you, too. He said that if he had been given your mission, he wouldn't have failed."

Draco huffed.

"I like to think he's right," Potter murmured.

Draco continued to stare at his feet. "Depends on your definition of failure," he allowed.

"Definitely." Potter hesitated. "I know my definition; I don't know yours."

Bloody Potter. Now he was interrogating him. "I'm glad things turned out the way they did," he confessed to his feet, but then he looked up and added, "I mean, I'm not glad Nott died so horribly and his wife lost her mind, but . . ." Draco shrugged, inwardly begging Potter to drop the subject.

Mercifully, Potter really did drop it and continued. "Eventually, they told us to stop and then . . . Nott cursed me. And then I guess he Obliviated you and staged the scene to make it look like you attacked me."

Draco frowned, dissatisfied. What kind of a story was that? Blah, blah, blah and then Nott cursed me. Honestly.

Draco studied Potter's expression carefully. "So, Nott hates my father more than anything?"

Potter nodded.

"Then his plan was . . .?"

"Well, to send his only son to Azkaban?"

Draco cocked his head. "Didn't Nott explain his plan during all that talk?"

"Well, yes." Potter scratched his head. "Yes, that's what he planned. To frame you for my murder."

"That's a . . . convoluted plan. It wasn't likely to succeed. And you weren't dead. Why not curse you again?"

Potter shrugged. "Nott's probably a little mental, too, I reckon."

Draco narrowed his eyes. Potter's cheeks were slightly redder than before. Was it possible Potter was hiding something? But what? And why?

"Merwyn Borage told me the curse was deflected," Draco remembered. "I thought you and Nott duelled."

"He did? I guess he's wrong."

"He's not."

"He must be," Potter insisted. "We were both Disarmed. The curse must have malfunctioned." Potter raised his chin stubbornly.

"But . . ." Draco began, but Potter cut him off.

"Oh, I just remembered I have to go. I have to study. I'm a bit behind. I missed a bunch of classes." Potter took a hasty step back.

"Wait!" Draco cried. "Are you sure that's all? There's nothing you're not telling me?"

Potter hesitated for a second and opened his mouth, but then he apparently changed his mind and smiled instead. "Malfoy, you didn't do anything wrong, I promise. You should relax and stop worrying so much." Potter sounded earnest and Draco relaxed a little.

"You remember what happened after you were cursed?"

"I remember I was cold and then I was warm. And I remember I was in pain, and then I wasn't. I don't know . . . McGonagall told me everything you told her, so it probably feels like I remember more than I actually do. Some things she said sounded familiar. It's all a bit hazy, though. Some things . . ." Potter's gaze searched Draco's face carefully. Draco forced his features to relax and eventually Potter gave him a tentative smile, even though he looked a bit sad.

"All right, then," Draco said a bit dismissively, eager to get out of Potter's sight. If Potter remembered anything about kissing and touching and shagging attempts, he must have thought it was a dream. Draco planned to keep it that way.

Potter nodded uncertainly, but then his eyes widened. "Oh, I almost forgot." He grinned. "Slughorn will announce it tomorrow at Potions, but he already told me earlier — we won the feather-hunting contest."

Taken aback, Draco grimaced. "Er, how?"

"Professor Merrythought found a dead Jobberknoll near the cabin and she brought me the feathers."

Draco blinked once in utter disbelief. "She plucked the feathers of a dead bird for you?"

Potter laughed, his eyes twinkling. "It was a very touching moment."

"I can imagine." Draco smiled a little; Potter's laughter was infectious.

"See you around," Potter said, walking backward slowly.

"Thank you!" Draco was still smiling. "For the wand."

"Thank you," Potter countered and gave him an odd furtive look that was charged with emotion. Draco stopped smiling and Potter turned around and walked away hastily.

Draco stared at the spot where Potter had disappeared for a long time. He felt like something important just slipped through his fingers.

*

The moment Harry Potter began to attend classes, the story of their forest adventure spread through the school like wildfire. As all such stories, it turned more and more ridiculous with every passing day. The last version Draco had heard insisted he had carried Potter through the woods, found the cabin using wandless magic, started the fire using nothing but two stones, and healed Potter by summoning Merlin himself to help him. He heard a second year student trying to convince a wide-eyed friend that Draco

had actually built the cabin before they took shelter in it.

Students were staring at Draco wherever he went, many of them approaching him, begging for details and confirmation. Several Gryffindors congratulated him and thanked him for saving Harry Potter's life; a Ravenclaw girl sent him a basket of fruit, and a few Hufflepuff first-years accosted him in the hallway and gathered around him to sing him a song they had written about the event. Draco suspected Blaise had bribed the Hufflepuffs to sing, because Blaise was the only one stupid enough to think of something so humiliating.

The professors were even worse. Flitwick gave him a Chocolate Frog every time Draco waved his wand in the Charms class and Pomona Sprout gifted him with a pair of pink earmuffs. ("They belonged to my great-grandmother! She wore them until the moment of her death!") Slughorn had hugged him — inappropriately — as he handed Draco a vial of Memory Potion; Draco still felt a little nauseous whenever he remembered the incident. Even Merrythought was polite to him, though she did shoot nasty glares in his direction when she thought no one was looking. Draco suspected she was upset over the stone incident and possibly jealous that Draco had had a naked Potter all to himself for hours. On top of everything, McGonagall made a special announcement during Saturday's dinner. She publicly praised Draco, thanked him, called him a hero in front of the entire school, and awarded eighty points to Slytherin for Draco's bravery and quick thinking, plus another twenty to Pansy for successfully uncovering Theodore Nott's involvement.

The Slytherins, who were, until that point, uninterested in fawning over Draco (some of them were downright angry with him for saving Potter), joined the worship club quickly after they realised that those hundred points meant they were back in the running for the House Cup.

Pansy forced Draco to stand and bow with her as McGonagall began to applaud and the entire school followed. The other three houses didn't even look upset that the Slytherins had won so many points. They were smiling and beaming at him; a pack of Ravenclaw girls blew kisses in his direction.

Draco's gaze searched for a messy-haired Gryffindor in the crowd. Potter was laughing and when Draco directed a glare at him, he only laughed harder.

"How fucking brilliant is this?" Pansy whispered, ecstatic by the attention.

"Yeah, it's fucking brilliant," Draco said angrily, but Pansy didn't appear to hear him.

Almost the entire school looked at him with wide, impressed eyes and Draco hated every moment of it.

He had everything he had ever wanted and more. He had the respect of the people around him; students and professors alike. N.E.W.T.s didn't look so frightening, anymore. The story was spreading fast; even the examiners would have heard of it by the time of the exams. They would treat him fairly, possibly be even kinder than necessary. Not that Draco had to worry about a perfect score, anymore. He already had a spectacular job offer; Merwyn Borage had written to confirm it. The man actually sounded worried that Draco would choose a different career.

His family’s reputation was saved. Draco's father wrote to tell him how much he was proud of him for achieving it in such an ingenious way. Draco suspected his father thought Draco had planned the whole thing.

And Draco didn't deserve any of it. Nothing that had been done could have been achieved without Felix Felicis, but that part of the tale didn't reach anyone's ears. Pansy wasn't sharing that information and neither was McGonagall. Draco suspected Potter knew, as well; McGonagall wouldn't have lied to him, but he had obviously never mentioned it to anyone. It was as though they had all conspired to turn Draco into something he was not. Draco hadn't told his parents about the Luck Potion, either. They had corresponded with Borage and been informed that Draco was an absolute genius; Draco couldn’t bring himself to tell them that Borage was wrong. They had sounded so proud.

On top of all that, he had another thing he didn't deserve — Potter's affection. Draco could see it clearly in those green eyes whenever Potter looked at him; and Potter looked at him a lot, even though, mercifully, he kept his distance.

Draco had no idea how he had earned the unlikely affection in the first place, but he knew he should have lost it after he had given into his desires and took what he could from a feverish Potter.

Draco's feelings of worthlessness culminated a week after the fateful events in the forest; the very same

day McGonagall praised him in front of the school and everyone who had doubted Draco's heroism quickly turned into believers. The final blow to Draco's dwindling confidence was prompted by Merwyn Borage's letter. Lovely though the letter was, Borage had also enclosed his research on Memory Potions, insisting that Draco might find it interesting. And he was right.

Borage hadn't been trying to improve the Memory Potions so students could use them to cheat on their exams. He hoped that one day he would find a way to enhance a person's memory so greatly, the memories of those whose minds had been damaged beyond repair could be restored. It was an admirable goal and Borage still had a long way to go, but the new formula for the Memory Potion could already counter the effects of a simple Memory Charm. Borage had given him detailed instructions on how to restore his memories, warning Draco that the restoration might not be complete.

Draco wasn't quite certain he wanted to know exactly what had happened in the forest and what Potter was hiding, but he couldn't resist the temptation.

He did it in his bed in the middle of the night while everyone else was asleep. He followed Borage's instructions faithfully; he drank a Calming Draught, practiced Occlumency and only after his mind was sufficiently blank did he drink the vial of Memory Potion Slughorn had given him. Borage had said Draco should concentrate on something specific that could jog his memory and Draco had just the thing for this purpose. He fished out Harry Potter's old glasses from underneath his pillow and stared at them, willing his mind to remember.

It worked, to an extent, but seeing what had happened didn't make Draco feel any better, only worse.

The memories were blurry and incomplete, but he remembered why he had punched Potter. They were fighting, or rather, Draco was fighting and Potter was flirting. When Potter tried to kiss him, Draco slammed his fist into Potter's jaw. He remembered the feeling that had made him react the way he did — panic. Mind-blowing panic.

But he had already suspected something similar had happened. Even though it meant Draco's actions helped Nott and Harper to surprise and Disarm them, it was not the incident that disturbed him. What happened afterward was much more unnerving.

Draco remembered Nott's face, distorted by an enraged grimace. Nott had pointed Draco's own wand at him and sneered with pure hatred in his eyes.

"I wish I could see your father's face when they find you in the forest with your guts torn apart," Nott had said. "You were so obviously attacked by a vicious beast. A horrible, random tragedy. I doubt anyone would even care enough to investigate. They'll be too grateful Potter survived, confused though he will be, our poor hero, after I Obliviate him."

Draco remembered Harper's wide, shocked eyes and Nott's excited expression, and then a grey curse flew toward him. He remembered his fear and the cold wind on his face as the curse travelled, seemingly forever. He remembered thinking about his mother who would be devastated when they told her Draco wouldn't come back home.

The curse never reached him. Potter, stupid, thoughtless, wandless Potter, with his wide green eyes filled with terror, cried, "Protego!" and threw himself in front of the curse.

A part of the curse rebounded off the shield, nearly hitting a gobsmacked Nott, who jumped to the side at the last second. Potter flew backward, his shoulder slamming into Draco; his glasses slipped to the ground as he fell and he pulled Draco down with him. Draco remembered pain exploding in his temple as he hit the ground, falling onto his side with Potter's arm wrapped protectively around him.

The memory turned blurry and all Draco could remember was pain and his shock. Potter had taken the curse for him and as a result lay peacefully on the ground as though he was dead. Draco had been sure Potter was dead.

Nott, though clearly terrified, tried to curse Draco again. Unable to stand up, Draco wrapped his heavy arms around Potter in a pointless, mindless gesture, waiting for the inescapable death. But a bright shield shimmered in front of him, stronger than ever, blocking the curse completely. Nott barely had time to duck again as the curse shot back toward him. Derwent Harper ran away in horror.

The last thing Draco remembered was Nott's frightened voice as he cried, "Obliviate!" and then Potter was wrenched out of Draco's arms and everything turned dark.

Potter probably didn't even realise what he had done. He didn't know his wandless Shield Charm would work, but Draco had seen him cast a spell wandlessly in the cabin. All Potter was trying to hide was the fact that he had taken the curse instead of Draco.

But he had done so much more. Draco remembered Potter's speech after he had defeated the Dark Lord; he remembered the confusing part when Potter talked about the power of sacrifice and the only form of magic strong enough to counter dark curses. Draco had scoffed at his ramblings at the time, but they didn't seem so ridiculous anymore. A shield that had protected Draco after Potter was already cursed wasn't a simple charm; it was a shield the likes of which Draco had never seen. It let Nott Obliviate him, but it did not let him curse him. Nott couldn't hurt him. The shield protected Draco from the Dark Magic better than it had protected Potter himself; it was stronger after Potter's insane sacrifice.

Nott must not have dared to point his wand at Potter again. Considering the circumstances, Nott's hasty attempt to frame Draco wasn't half-bad. If Potter had died, he might have succeeded.

The memories dispersed and Draco sat on his bed and stared at the darkness for a long time, toying with the glasses in his hands.

Potter had saved them both. His feelings for Draco must have run deeper than Draco had thought. Much deeper. It was a terrifying thought to contemplate. Draco felt less worthy than ever.

One thing was perfectly clear now — Draco wasn't the hero of the tale. Yet again, it was Potter.

*

It was snowing on the last Hogsmeade weekend before the Christmas holidays. The snowflakes were so

dense the Great Hall ceiling looked purely white. The morning post was wet and damaged, as were the poor owls who delivered it. They brought much fast-melting snow with them to the Hall.

Draco's package full of sweets was relatively unharmed, but the sight of it didn't bring him any joy. His parents, like everyone else, seemed intent on showering him with attention. Abandoning his porridge, Draco picked up his mother's letter and pushed the package toward Goyle. For a moment, the ecstatic look on Goyle's face was so great Draco thought Goyle would hug him, but fortunately, Goyle was much more interested in ripping the package apart.

"Leave some for me!" Pansy cried. Goyle tossed her a lollipop.

Pansy shook her head but took the lollipop, nonetheless. "So rude. Tell him, Draco!"

However, Draco ignored her and scowled at his mother's letter. The presence of the package of sweets annoyed him. It meant the letter contained more praise and comfort, which wasn't what Draco wanted.

Two days ago, after a very favourable article about him was published in the Daily Prophet, he'd had a minor nervous breakdown. Or perhaps not so minor, considering he had done the most shocking thing imaginable — he had written to his mother and told her everything. He spared her certain details, but left no room for doubt about what had happened in the cabin. He had confessed his usage of Felix Felicis and told her point-blank that he was not the genius she thought he was.

Putting his fears and doubts on a piece of paper had been cathartic; sending it to his mother had been stupid. But his mother would still love him and he needed someone to know the whole truth and yet not care.

Grumpily, he opened the letter.

The first section was strange. His mother seemed fixated on the fact he had done inappropriate things with a boy and she reminded him of his status as a Malfoy and his responsibility to the Malfoy name. Draco had expected her to say as much, but what he did not expect was for her to finish the passage by telling him that if he chose to pursue a romantic relationship with Potter, his father would not be easily

persuaded to accept it, and they would have to break the news to him carefully.

Draco stared at his mother's words in disbelief. She must have misinterpreted something Draco had written. She all but gave him her blessing to date Potter and promised to be their ally. As though Draco had asked for such a thing. He was positive he hadn't.

However, the second part of the letter drove everything else from his mind. Draco read it three times, but the words refused to make sense. Pansy was shaking him something fierce, rambling about Hogsmeade and how it was time to go, but Draco couldn't tear his eyes from the letter, nor make his limbs move.

His whole world was suddenly turned upside-down by a passage that contained his mother's unexpected and heartfelt apology. It said:

Forgive me, my son, for your father and I have deceived you. We feared for your state of mind and your future. You were nothing but listless and depressed over the summer holidays, and more than once you expressed doubt about your ability to pass your N.E.W.T. examination. You have always been an intelligent child and we know, even though you have doubts, that you can achieve anything you wish, if only you wish for it hard enough.

Believe me when I say we had no other objective but to give you the hope and confidence which you have lost. We could not have foreseen the terrible events that transpired in the forest. We could not have dreamt you would need the potion for anything but your exams. However, the truth is, Draco, you could not have used it to deceive the examiners. Even a single drop of the Luck Potion would have alerted the charms intended to prevent cheating. It is not possible to pass your N.E.W.T.s through means of deception. Many have tried in the past and failed. You may ask any of your professors, or the examiners themselves, and they will confirm my words.

The golden liquid in your pendant was a harmless tonic. You have never drunk Felix Felicis. The voice that guided you through the forest and rescued you from your troubles was not the voice of liquid luck — it was your own.

"I swear, if you don't get up right now, I will leave you here!"

Draco's gaze snapped to Pansy. Her annoyance disappeared instantly.

"Oh, Draco, did something happen?" she asked, her eyes filling with concern. She glanced at the letter. "Bad news?" She reached out to take the letter from Draco's hands, but Draco quickly snatched it away. He had an unreasonable urge to press it close to his chest and guard it with his life.

Pansy frowned and Draco shot up from the bench, just to make her stop asking questions.

"Everything's fine," he whispered. Pansy stared at him suspiciously and Draco managed to smile.

"All right, come on," she said, probably too eager to go to press the matter further.

Draco let her pull him toward the students that crowded the Hogwarts entrance. Filch was examining permission slips and the elder students hovered at the end of the row impatiently.

"I don't know why he insists on going through the damn permission slips again. He examined them all twice already this year," Pansy grumbled.

Draco wasn't listening. His mind raced through the events in the forest. He couldn't understand what had helped him to save Potter, if not luck. All those thoughts in his head couldn't have been his own.

Or could they? The voice had never told him anything new; every piece of information, his every conclusion was based on something he had heard or seen before. It was merely unlikely he had remembered the various pieces of information and connected them to form his conclusions. But they were his and some of them were wrong, but most of them were right. Nonetheless, he had still found a random cabin and, even more importantly, cured Potter merely by experimenting and hoping the unusual potion combinations would work. That had to have been luck.

Borage's words echoed in Draco's mind.

"That is luck. But a corner of your mind knows how the ingredients react to each other and in the end you know you were lucky because you dared to follow your intuition."

Was that all he had followed — his intuition?

"Yes!" Pansy cried.

Draco blinked, focusing on his surroundings.

"He's finally done!" Pansy informed him, presumably talking about Filch. "About time. I have shopping to do. It's nearly Christmas!"

Draco's gaze flew over Pansy's head and stilled on Potter, who stood a few feet away, surrounded by a knot of Gryffindors. Potter caught his gaze, gave him a small smile, and turned away. A few Gryffindors smiled at Draco, as well, and one of them waved. Draco didn't recognise them, even though he probably should have. His mind was focused on something else. Something entirely insane that danced inside his head, refusing to pause and let Draco capture it and think about it properly.

Potter moved toward the exit and the wind whooshed through the door disturbing the black stands of Potter's tousled hair. Draco's thoughts finally settled. Everything was clear, suddenly.

He had been lucky because he thought he was lucky. Which meant he could be lucky whenever he wished. He could be lucky every day.

Any day.

This day.

Draco pushed forward through the crowd.

"Oh, Draco, I adore you. You cleared the path for me!" Pansy yelled behind him. "That's right! Push them! Everyone move aside! Hero coming through!"

The students must have really moved aside, because Draco was standing in front of Potter in no time. Potter turned toward him and the Gryffindors around him stopped walking to look at them.

Draco concluded he must have called Potter's name, because Potter was looking at him expectantly. So were the students around them.

"I, er . . ." Draco eyed their audience warily. "I need to talk to you."

"Um, okay." Potter waited.

"In private," Draco said quickly.

"Move along!" Filch screamed, sounding almost hysterical.

Potter looked at Filch, the crowd around them, and then at the professors that hung at the back of the row. He grimaced apologetically. "Can't it wait?"

"No!" Draco all but yelled. Filch's screams were driving him insane.

"But . . ." Potter looked around again at Granger, Weasley and the rest of the Gryffindors. They were blocking the exit. "Well, you can walk with us to Hogsmeade."

Granger quickly nodded and, after she stepped on his foot, so did Weasley.

"But, that's what . . ." Draco said, but then gritted his teeth. Filch was now yelling at them and the professors were beginning to look agitated, as well. Draco sighed inwardly. Oh, fuck it.

"I wanted to ask you if you would go with me to Hogsmeade," Draco said, not moving his gaze from Potter's wide eyes.

"We're all going to Hogsmeade, Malfoy," Weasley said.

"You can come with us. It's okay," Granger added quickly.

"No, no, he can't!" Pansy cried. "Draco, what's wrong with you? I'm not going with them."

Draco suspected he would prove Albus Dumbledore wrong, after all, and murder someone right then and there.

Potter hadn't said a word. He just stared.

"You there! Malfoy!" Filch yelled. "I'll report you! You know I will! Move!"

Draco ignored him. "I meant . . ."

Filch's hysteria passed onto Granger. She grabbed Draco's elbow. "Really, Malfoy. Come on."

Draco's hands clenched into fists. "I'm asking you on a date, Potter!" he yelled.

And he had done it again. He had been too loud. His words were greeted by utter silence. Even Filch stopped yelling. The only sound was the howling of the wind that whooshed through the open door as though it, too, wished to eavesdrop.

Potter blinked once, twice slowly, and then stopped blinking altogether.

"You're what?" Pansy whispered weakly.

Draco felt like groaning. Potter was silent and, Draco suspected, in utter shock.

Merlin, what was he thinking? Or, why hadn't he been thinking? He had been elated by his mother's revelation and her support; he hadn't even considered the possibility that Potter might not want to date. It was highly likely Potter was disturbed by his feelings and had no wish to advertise his sexual preferences to the whole world. Draco should have approached him privately. Now, he had put Potter on the spot and Potter had no choice but to refuse him and leave Draco utterly humiliated.

Lucky every day, Draco scoffed. What the fuck was he on about?

"I . . ." Potter said quietly and it seemed to Draco that everyone around them leaned in closer. Or maybe Draco was just dizzy. Potter cleared his throat. "I'd like that. Very much." He breathed in sharply, still apparently unable to blink. "Yes," he added.

Nobody moved or made a sound. Draco's mind was slowly processing Potter's answer.

Slughorn's voice reached Draco's ears. "Time to go!" he said and pushed some students forward and then, as though someone had cast a Babbling Charm on the crowd, whispers broke out, becoming

steadily louder. Draco was barely aware of it. Potter had said yes. They were going on a date. A fucking date.

The crowd thinned slowly; students walked around Potter and Draco, but several of them still lingered.

Slughorn smiled as he went past Potter, dragging a petrified-looking Merrythought with him. "What did I say?" Slughorn tapped his nose. "I can always tell."

Potter blushed a little.

"Draco!" Pansy whispered urgently and Draco managed to tear his gaze away from Potter to look at her. "Is this a part of some evil master plan?" she asked quietly.

"Er . . ." Draco studied her wide eyes and took pity on her. "Yes. Don't tell anyone." He smiled.

Pansy looked terribly relieved. "Oh, thank Salazar." She moved toward the exit and winked at him. Draco winked back, slapping himself inwardly. Goyle, with a red lollipop in his mouth, grinned and gave him a thumbs up. Draco had no idea if Goyle, too, thought Draco had an evil master plan, or if he was congratulating him on the date, or if he was simply sugar-high.

Draco quickly turned toward Potter, suddenly terrified that Potter had already left. However, to Draco's immense relief, Potter was still standing a few feet away, whispering something to Granger. She gave him a tentative smile and then took Weasley's hand and dragged him away. Weasley walked backward, blinking rapidly, his mouth wide open.

Draco refocused his gaze on Potter. They and Filch were the only ones still in the castle; the professors had walked ahead.

Potter smiled at him a little and Draco smiled back stupidly.

"If I lose my breakfast, guess who will get a detention and clean it up without magic?" a sneering voice said and Draco looked around at Filch. He glowered at them.

Draco opened his mouth to say something rude, but a gloved hand grabbed Draco's and pulled him forward.

"Come on," Potter said, smiling as they ran out of the castle, following the large crowd of students ahead.

They slowed their pace, trailing behind the rest of the group. Potter didn't release Draco's hand.

It wasn't snowing heavily, anymore, but snowflakes danced around them, occasionally hitting Draco's face like tiny cold missiles. It was almost painful to look around; everything was white.

However, it was much more difficult to look at Potter, so Draco took his chances and stared at the blinding snow. He had no plan. He had no idea what he was doing. He was on a date with Potter, holding his hand, and he had no idea what to even say to him. Nonetheless, he felt like smiling.

"Malfoy?" Potter said, sounding tentative.

"Hmm?" Draco stared ahead. He wondered if Potter would take back his answer. Maybe he had only agreed to the date to spare Draco the embarrassment. Draco squeezed Potter's hand tighter.

"Er, you have a letter in your hand."

Draco looked at his left hand sharply. He was still clutching his mother's letter.

"Oh! You should read this!" he said, eager to let Potter know that Draco hadn’t used the Luck Potion at all. He reluctantly let go of Potter's hand and opened the letter.

"Just one section." He scanned the letter quickly and then shoved it into Potter's hands, pointing to where he should start reading.

Potter looked at him, bemused.

Draco huffed impatiently. Potter was too damn slow. "I never drank Felix Felicis! Mother says it was fake," Draco said, unable to hide the pride in his tone.

Potter bit his lip. He didn't even look at the letter.

Draco happiness melted away slowly. "It's true," he said defensively. "Read it," he almost pleaded.

"Er, I know it's true." Potter handed him back the letter. He was avoiding Draco's eyes.

Draco stared at him.

Potter sighed and stopped walking. He turned toward Draco and gave him an apologetic look. "You should know the whole truth. I guess your mother never mentioned that she wrote to me over the summer?"

Draco slowly shook his head. He couldn't make sense of Potter's words.

"Well, she did. She said she was worried about you and your future. She said you were depressed and had lost your confidence after everything that happened with Voldemort. She asked if I could help you regain it. She hinted that I owed her and I could maybe find you a respectable job."

"Merlin." Draco gasped, embarrassed. He couldn't believe his mother had been asking favours from Potter. "I'm so sorry, I had no idea."

Potter shook his head dismissively. "She wasn't the only one who sent me a letter like that." He smiled a little. "I told her what I told everyone else. I didn't plan to ask for any favours for myself or anyone else. If someone wanted something, they would have to earn it. I'm sorry, but . . ."

"No, I understand," Draco said quickly. He owed Potter too much, already. He didn't want his help. He wanted his respect.

"Well, she assured me you're very intelligent and said she's positive N.E.W.T.s wouldn't be a problem if you just had a little more faith in your abilities."

Draco closed his eyes in mortification. He and his mother would have to have a serious talk about this.

"And, well, like I said, I told her I couldn’t help. And I mentioned the only way I knew to raise someone's confidence levels was to give them a fake Felix Felicis. It was a joke, but she must have been desperate, because she wrote back asking for more details. So I told her how I had fooled Ron once and made him think he had drunk the Luck Potion. He had a very lucky day. We beat the Slytherin team that day because of it. Ron's a good Keeper but he has no faith in his abilities. It was a tiny push, but it helped immensely. "

"Oh." Draco dug his heels deeper into the snow. He wasn't sure how to feel about this revelation. It meant that all this time Potter was aware that Draco had had no help in the forest. It meant Potter hadn't been lying to his friends to make Draco look better; he was merely telling the truth. It meant Potter knew more about Draco than Draco knew himself.

"When McGonagall told me you had Felix Felicis in the forest . . ." Potter shrugged, grinning. "I was pretty sure the potion was fake."

Draco glared at him. "You should have told me."

"I figured your parents would tell you, eventually." Potter grinned. "I guessed they hadn't yet, because you looked so guilty and humbled whenever someone praised you. It was fascinating to watch." Something flickered in Potter's eyes. He squinted and cocked his head. "You should have told me what really happened in the cabin."

Draco's heart skipped a beat. Potter's eyes bored into his; his expression was serious and accusing.

Shit. The date was over before it even began. He should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Luck potion or not, hero or not, he had still taken advantage of Potter. And Potter remembered. Now he knew why Potter had agreed to the date — he wanted a chance to confront Draco.

Draco could feel his cheeks heating up. It was hard to look at Potter. "You should have told me you took the Curse for me," he said in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

Potter's grave expression transformed into shock. His lips parted and his eyes were as round as saucers. He studied Draco's expression carefully. "You mean, it really happened?" he breathed.

It took Draco two seconds to realise that Potter wasn't referring to the moment when he threw himself in front of the curse. Potter knew that was real.

Draco's knees almost gave out. Potter had tricked him. He was bluffing. And Draco had failed to deny the events in the cabin. Potter was just guessing. He didn't know. But he knew now. Draco couldn't deny it, anymore. He fucking blew it.

Draco slowly nodded in defeat; intense shame washed over him. "Yes. It really did."

"My dream . . . wasn't a dream?" Potter's face was devoid of colour. He edged closer.

Draco closed his eyes so he wouldn't see Potter's eyes turn cold.

"Not a dream," he whispered.

The moment of silence that followed was difficult to withstand. Draco didn't know what to expect.

Warm gloved hands cupped his face, making Draco gasp a little in fright. Potter's thumbs caressed his cheeks and Draco dared to open his eyes.

Potter was standing close, so close their noses were almost touching. Draco could feel Potter's warm breath ghosting over his lips.

"You kissed me and touched me everywhere and you were looking at me like . . . That was real? Real real?" Potter still didn't look angry, merely stunned.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Draco said quickly, hoping the absence of anger meant Potter was inclined to forgive him.

"You are?"

"I took advantage of you."

Potter frowned. "I remember . . . I tied you up."

The wind wrapped itself around Draco's body, squeezing his chest and not allowing him to breathe. He inhaled sharply, shivering. "But then you freed me. And I didn't stop. And I am so sorry. You had a fever and you had no idea where you were and I didn't stop, and I know I should have." Draco knew he was

babbling, but he couldn't shut up. "But I didn't . . . I didn't go far. I thought I had cursed you and that you'd hate me forever and send me to Azkaban and I just . . . I just couldn’t stop. It was just a few stolen kisses —"

Potter's grip on Draco's face became firmer; he shook Draco's head a little. "They weren't stolen," Potter said sharply. "Draco, I remember everything. I wanted it." The look in Potter's eyes softened impossibly. "You have no idea how much," he whispered.

"You weren't yourself —"

"I was." Potter laughed, sounding nervous, or merely excited. He was shivering. "Merlin, I should apologise to you. I tied you up and . . . Bloody hell." Potter blushed, the colour spread from his cheeks and disappeared beneath his scarf.

Draco's arms realised Potter wasn't angry before Draco's mind came to the conclusion. They sneaked behind Potter and wrapped themselves around Potter's waist, pulling him closer, trapping him in a firm embrace.

"So, we are a couple of dirty molesters?" he asked lightly, still unable to accept the fact that Potter wasn't at all angry; that despite his delirium, Potter knew exactly what he wanted in the cabin. And he wanted Draco. It was ridiculous how liberating that knowledge was. Apparently, Draco was the one who needed reassurance that what had happened in the cabin was real.

Potter grinned and nodded vigorously. "Good thing we're together. At least other people don't have to fear our violating ways."

"Are we? Together?" Draco asked quietly.

"I'd like to see you try and get rid of me. I'm obviously a master of wandless bondage." Potter's voice lowered; he was almost whispering. Their noses touched. A snowflake fell on Draco's cheek and Potter brushed it way with his thumb.

"Lucky me," Draco murmured and tilted his head. His lips parted and Potter's gaze flickered toward them and then back to Draco's eyes.

An eternity passed before Potter's lips touched his. The gentle pressure made Draco sigh and close his eyes. They stood like that for a moment and then Potter's hands were in Draco's hair and they were clinging to each other desperately, their tongues intertwined and lips locked together.

It occurred to Draco that he had been silly when he thought he would never get a chance to do this again. It was obvious, now, that he would do nothing but kiss Potter forever.

With a breathless gasp, Potter pulled away slightly, but his lips were still caressing Draco's, their warm touch sending shivers through Draco's body, all the way to his toes.

"Honestly!" someone cried.

Draco grumbled against Potter's lips, kissed them gently once more and looked around reluctantly.

Professor Merrythought stood a little farther ahead, clutching her side and breathing heavily.

"I thought we lost you again. Really!" she wheezed. "Stop doing that!"

Draco suspected she wanted them to stop hugging and kissing rather than stop disappearing.

"We're coming, Professor!" Potter said, pulling away and releasing Draco's hair with a regretful caress.

Draco snickered. "Not yet, surely."

Potter snorted and shook his head. His glasses were foggy; it made Draco want to kiss him again.

"Well?" Merrythought pointed toward the Hogsmeade village. "Go!" she snapped sternly and waited.

Potter grabbed Draco's hand and pulled him forward, kicking the snow childishly as they walked. As they passed Merrythought, Draco heard her grumble, "Of course he's gay. Just my luck."

No, it's mine, Draco thought giddily and pulled Potter closer.

Potter smiled at him. His face was brighter than the snowy grounds.

Fin

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Don't forget to go back to H/D Holidays on LJ and leave feedback!