Fic Glomp for [info]anexiana

Title: Landslide

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Recipient: [info]anexiana

Rating: NC17

Word Count: ~25,000

Pairing(s): Harry/Draco

Summary: Harry Potter disappears, taking a sick Teddy Lupin with him. While everyone searches for their missing hero, Draco's life continues as it always has. Rumors of curses and kidnapping don't interest him. As Hogwarts' guardian, he has only one concern: the strange, miraculous events occurring on the cliffs outside the castle walls.

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A/N: Many thanks to the mods for their fabulous idea and hard work in organizing the fest. Although I'm filling a prompt for a particular person, I hope this story gives pleasure to others as well. I've had many supporters over the years, vocal and silent, known and unknown, and I relish every opportunity to glomp them. So… thank you!

[info]anexiana, you've been my cheerleader since I was Sansa. From fanfic to originalfic to profic… you've stuck with me through it all. Thank you! I hope you enjoy the story.

Special thanks to [info]absynthedrinker, [info]alaanafair, and [info]sesheta_66 for their feedback and edits. Much love and gratitude to the talented [info]marysue007 for the accompanying art… and to Bubba for commissioning it. ♥

LANDSLIDE

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Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop,

When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.

When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,

And down will come baby, cradle and all.

"It's time you learned the difference between life and dreams."

~Lucius Malfoy

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art by [info]marysue007

One

Draco is the first to notice the patch of white heather growing in the shadow of the castle wall. He'll be the last, if the low, grey clouds skimming across the lake bring the weather he expects. The moist air promises a heavy, damp snow, and the tender blooms and pale leaves will blend too well with the fresh mantle to catch anyone's attention, even if they should come upon the place.

Heather. In February. And of the purest mythical white. Draco squats and presses the nearest bloom between his fingers, releasing the flower's scent. He doesn't fight the smile that tugs at his lips. Good luck is hard to come by these days, and he'll take what he can get, even if sentimentality is a fool's security blanket.

Has anyone else noticed the flowers? He glances around, but the only sign of life is a flurry of tentacles far out in the lake. Nobody frequents this side of the castle. The cliff slopes away to the lake at a dangerous angle, and there isn't a single window cut into the rough, mossy wall. It's a solitary place, and a deadly one, if he's not careful: the snow has been slicked smooth by yesterday's cold rain. One misstep would end it all, and in the most literal of fashions.

As if agreeing, the snowpack shifts like quicksand, and Draco shoots to his feet, pinwheeling his arms. A sheet of ice slides away, gaining speed as it goes, then slips silently over the cliff. Unnerved, Draco finds his balance and steps back against the stone wall, shivering despite his heavy winter cloak. His toes curl inside his boots.

Hogwarts vibrates against his back, and Draco closes his eyes, accepting the comfort. He's been back at the school long enough that the thrum of friendly magic is welcome, even if it doesn't come with flesh and blood, a kind voice, or a warm touch. The castle has no reason or motive to forgive him for the damage he's caused, yet it has.

The people within its walls have been slower to accept his presence. But Draco has been caretaker for several years now, interacting with staff and students nine months out of twelve, and the initial

animosity has settled into a predictable chilly disapproval. He's learned to accept it.

He brings his hand to his mouth, intent on wiping away the sweat breaking across his upper lip, but it stops a few inches short of its target. His fist is full of flowers, the lopsided bouquet still shedding damp soil from the roots where he ripped it from the earth when he stumbled.

"White heather," he whispers, wondering if his voice is the talisman that will cause the flowers to wither and die, for surely no natural phenomenon would make such an unusual plant thrive months before it should. Then again—Draco tilts his head and examines the patch of white flowers—he knows no natural reason why the spread of foliage should take the rudimentary shape of a Gryffindor lion either.

He stays until the snow begins to fall. Before long, its heavy, sticky flakes topple the stalks, distorting the lion's outline. Its mouth, set in a trademark snarl, widens into a yawn, and the noble arch of its back sags. It looks stretched out, spread too thin. Comical.

To his consternation, Draco can't rouse a proper feeling of delight. Frowning, he turns to pick his way back along the castle wall, wary of slippery boulders and shifting patches of snow. It's a long way down, and he's no fool.

Nobody would come looking for him for a while.

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Breakfast is Draco's least favorite meal of the day, but that has little to do with the food that the house-elves prepare. The students of this generation have a carefree spirit, the sort Draco and his mates enjoyed during his first years at the school, when the word 'future' made him smile instead of shake, and the most troublesome thing on his mind was how to win the next round of one-upmanship with Potter. The children of today have no memory of war. They're blind to the still-present piles of rubble that dot the castle. As such, their energies are mostly directed to the few things their young minds are wired for:

adventure and cruelty.

Typically, mornings bring the most mischief.

Curbing their adventurous spirit is Draco's responsibility, and he takes it seriously. Hogwarts comes with a hefty list of dangers, more now than ever before. Filch, he thinks, would have been proud of how Draco handles things, although whether the man had been capable of such an emotion is a mystery he took to his grave. No one knew Argus well enough to ask… except Dumbledore, and Draco would rather suffer a Cruciatus than talk to the headmaster's portrait.

He'd thought things would be different when he returned, and he was right. But strangely, it's Hogwarts, formed of stone and mortar, that's changed—that continues to change—while the children, delicate flesh and blood, remain the same. They play the same practical jokes, hide in the same passageways, and taunt the same staff members as they always have.

Draco takes the brunt of their cruelty. No surprise there. In fact, he's beginning to believe it's a prerequisite for his job.

"Careful." Poppy stays his hand when he reaches for his pumpkin juice. "I believe I saw one of the Cahill twins drop something in there as I was coming in." She pats his arm, her favorite gesture of comfort, before leaning away.

Draco eyes the goblet.

His first year back had been the worst, but word spread, as it often does, and by the Welcoming Feast of his second year, the practical jokes had slowed to a trickle. Draco is no Argus Filch; he has the power to kill and makes sure the little brats know it. What he's careful to hide is how the thought of doing so can make him sick enough to vomit.

"Saw you disappear around the south side of the castle this morning," Poppy says around a mouthful of eggs. "Do be careful out there."

"I'm always careful," Draco snaps.

Besides "white heather", which he whispered to himself on the cliff, these are the first words he's uttered in fourteen hours, and his voice cracks on the first syllable. He clears his throat, but pulls his hand back when it reflexively reaches for his goblet of pumpkin juice. "Safeguarding the perimeter of the castle is part of my job."

"So it is."

She has more to say, that much is obvious. Draco spreads butter over his toast while he waits.

"Have you heard the latest on Potter?" She follows this with a loud slurp of tea, and Draco's whole body jumps a little at the name. He covers well, picking up his fork as though he was reaching for it all along, even though his plate holds nothing but toast.

"I have," he drawls, unable to help a childish roll of his eyes. "Walking on water now, I hear. Busy boy."

Poppy clucks her tongue, but doesn't comment on his pettiness. "I meant have you heard about how he's disappeared?"

Now that is a shock, and he doesn't bother trying to hide the fact. Not even Poppy's self-satisfied smirk deflects his curiosity. Turning to face her, he reaches once again for his goblet, needing to wet his suddenly dry throat.

Poppy catches his hand and presses a cup of steaming tea into his palm instead. She taps her wand against the lip of his goblet, and it pops out of existence.

"Disappeared?" Draco prompts, darting a glance at the circle of condensation left behind on the table.

"Right off the edge of the earth." Poppy's eyes slide to the left and Draco's follow, but Minerva is deep in conversation with some other unfortunate soul. Poppy's attempt at discretion can only mean one thing: Potter's friends are trying to keep the latest drama a secret. Draco is more intrigued than ever.

"And he's taken that child with him. Can you imagine?" she continues.

Frankly, no. Gossip isn't something he regularly engages in. "What child?"

Poppy slaps one plump hand to her chest. "What child? Why, Teddy Lupin, of course." Her eyes narrow with disapproval. "The boy's your cousin, Draco. Haven't you the slightest idea of what's been happening with him?"

Draco's related to half the wizards in England. Since when is he expected to keep up with every single one? Appearing ignorant isn't appealing, though. He attacks the issue from the side—like any good Slytherin. "Ah yes, the werewolf's spawn. How old is the mutt now?" He eyes a crack in the ceiling, pretending to think. "Seven?"

Born the last year of the war. Does Poppy honestly think Draco could forget?

"Seven." Poppy hums her disapproval. "At least you got that part right."

Apparently she does. The knowledge stirs his indignation, but little else.

"You know he's been sick," she says, nibbling on a piece of toast. It hadn't been a question, but Draco nods, wondering who they're talking about now: Potter or Teddy.

"And Andromeda has had him to every healer in the country."

Teddy, then. Despite himself, Draco feels a spark of concern.

"But then they had that falling out, Harry and Andromeda. Something about the illness. They say now it's a curse afflicting the poor boy."

Well Potter would know if that's the case. And if even a smidge of Draco's recollections about his aunt are correct, Draco's Galleons are on Potter's diagnosis. Andromeda is as flighty as a peacock.

"Seven is too young to die." Poppy dabs at her eyes with the corner of her wimple. "Far too young."

And that, at least, they both agree on.

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The boy occupies his thoughts for the rest of the day.

He's saved from having to explain his distraction due to the simple fact that nobody goes out of their way to speak to him—a mutual win/win that has been the status quo since he assumed Filch's position.

His father was the first to give him the silent treatment, after he'd had his say on the matter of Draco's new employment.

"Malfoys are not caretakers," Lucius spat as Draco shrank his trunks and slipped them into his pocket. That's true, Draco had wanted to respond, Malfoys don't look after anything very well, as a general rule.

Regardless, Hogwarts welcomed his presence. From the moment he stepped inside, its magic swept through him, ripping past his defenses as if they were parchment, bringing more honest welcome in one rush than he'd experienced his whole life. Breathless, he'd stumbled over his own feet just inside the front doors, the words you belong here ringing through his head. Since it was romantic to believe that the sentiment came from Hogwarts and not from his own bruised hear, Draco nurtured the sentiment.

Now, Teddy on his mind, he wanders, but not aimlessly. Rather, the castle guides him to where he's needed, and Draco has learned to follow the pull of ancient magic without question. It's not as though there's a shortage of work. There's more than enough lingering destruction to be righted: he spends his days erasing scorch marks from walls, rebuilding stone arches, and straightening portraits. Why one room or hall takes precedence over another from day to day he doesn't understand, and he doesn't care. He could labor until he's fifty putting the castle to rights and still not be done.

His life has become more about the past than the present. Sometimes he thinks that being forced to relive the deeds of his childhood day in and day out should weigh heavier on his mind, yet it doesn't. In fact, Draco finds it cathartic.

Today he's reassembling fallen suits of armor, a task just mindless enough that Teddy remains in the forefront of his thoughts. He has questions upon questions. How long has the child been sick? Can Potter cure him? Just how serious is Potter's break with his friends and family? Poppy hadn't been very forthcoming, which is very unlike her. It figures that when he finally wants gossip on a certain subject, she shuts up tighter than a clam.

Eventually, Draco's curiosity outweighs his good sense. As soon as the armor is put to rights, he retreats to his office to pen a letter to his father.

Months have passed since he's exchanged any sort of correspondence with his parents, but the mystery of a missing Potter is too difficult to ignore. He figures he'll get the answers he seeks, but at a price. So be it. Time and distance have given him the wherewithal to ignore most of Lucius' insults. He keeps the letter concise. The truth is, beyond his questions regarding Potter, there really isn't much to say.

His reply arrives during dinner that evening, and if Draco weren't so intent on reading the letter, he would take more time to enjoy everyone's shock. It's not often he receives mail.

"A letter, Draco?" Poppy's eyes are round. "Is everything all right?"

Nosy bird. "Fine," Draco replies, tone clipped. He frees the roll of parchment, gives the delivery owl a treat, and breaks the seal.

Draco, it begins. Not Son, as Lucius used to begin his letters, in the lifetime before this one.

I was going to write you about this very subject.

Not the thing Draco wants to hear. His stomach flips. Next to him, Poppy shifts in her seat, and Draco turns the parchment away from her prying eyes.

Yes, Potter has kidnapped your cousin. Keep your eyes and ears open. If you hear anything at all about his possible whereabouts, you are to contact me immediately.

Draco blinks, then rereads the previous sentence. Surely Lucius isn't expressing concern for the Lupin child?

This is the perfect chance to destroy Potter's reputation and livelihood.

Draco snorts. Now that's more like it. Still, the short missive does little to clear up the mystery. Perhaps that was his father's intention.

Now on to other subjects. Are you ready to make something of your life?

That sentence gets an arched eyebrow. How very solicitous. Insulting and condescending, but within

kissing distance of polite. What is his father up to?

By now, I would have hoped that you were ready to put this ridiculous self-imposed punishment behind you. Come home. Get married, even if you will never be a true husband. Procure an heir, if you can.

Draco stares at the words without seeing them. An heir. Not a son or a daughter. Just a trophy to show off to the world. Typical. Almost as typical as the tired insults regarding his bed partners. Draco crumples the parchment in his fist, then banishes it. Enough. Potter can keep his mystery. Draco has better things to occupy his time and thoughts.

"Bad news?" Poppy ventures.

"No news," Draco replies quite honestly.

"I was hoping…." Poppy's voice drops off.

"Hoping?" Draco asks, despite his overwhelming urge to ignore the implied question.

"That it might be some news about Harry and Teddy. I thought that once you knew what has going on, that you might try to help."

For the second time in a single day, Poppy has shocked him nearly speechless. "What could possibly have given you that idea?" he asks. He genuinely wants to know, because it's a huge leap of logic to believe shared genes means Draco cares about some half-blood cousin.

Again with the disapproving glare. Poppy's lips are pressed into a thin, white line. "You're his family, Draco."

"Oh honestly," Draco mutters and stomps away from the table.

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The following week brings more tension. Minerva snaps at whoever is unfortunate enough to cross her path, Poppy sniffles into a handkerchief at meals, and Draco happily ignores all the histrionics. Thoughts of a sick Teddy dwindle, but never disappear. Draco works, patrols the castle, and reminisces. His memories are all of Potter.

It's distinctly unsettling.

Nine days after Poppy tells him about Teddy, Draco climbs over the rocky ground where the castle meets the cliff, to where he found the white heather. The sun is making a rare appearance, and while it warms the air, it also melts the surface of the snow into a glistening layer of ice. Draco moves quietly and with great care, wand clenched in his gloveless fist.

The area is as desolate as it always is. The likelihood of trouble here is slim to none, but the white heather is the wrench. Whatever wayward magic created it, Draco needs to investigate. It's his responsibility.

Gentle breezes ruffle the collar of his cloak. It isn't enough to throw him off-balance, but every once in a while, the peculiar architecture of the castle bends the wind into a strong gust, so Draco tenses with every brush of air to his face. Vigilance could save his life. Far below, the surface of the water is mirror-smooth, unaffected by the turbulent air. Ice extends from the shore several feet into the lake.

It's been the coldest winter Draco can remember.

The heather is gone, either buried under the snow or just vanished, as things born from magic are wont to do. He supposes it's stupid to feel disappointed, but the white flower lion is the most exciting thing to happen to him in ages—if he doesn't count Potter going missing—and he was rather hoping for another

dose of mystery.

"Damn," he says and leans back against the weathered stone. Another strong gust whips past, twirling the loose powder into mini tornadoes. Sheltered in the slanted wall of the castle, Draco feels nothing. Just dampness soaking into his boots and numbing cold at the tips of his fingers where he holds his wand.

With a sigh, he tilts his head into the sun, and that's when he sees it.

His first thought is that somebody painted the wall, but no, that's not it. The stone is awash with colors, but it isn't paint he's seeing. To his best guess, the mural stretches twenty feet high and ten feet wide and is formed of crustose lichens. To wonder if it's magical is the same as wondering if Snape had possessed a bitter temperament. The real question is why is it here, where nobody will see it, save Draco?

The picture, like the flower lion, is childishly simplistic. And damn familiar. Draco risks two steps away from the wall, toward the edge of the cliff, in order to get a better look. Distorted, like an impressionist painting, the shapes are still recognizable. A man, or maybe a boy, standing with his arms raised, while black birds circle overhead. Draco shakes his finger at the wall. "I've seen you," he mutters.

Making flowers bloom in February in Scotland is one thing. Manipulating lichen to cover 200 square feet of stone is another. To some, the difference would seem academic, but Draco knows the truth of it: no student currently at the school possesses such power and skill. No professor either, except possibly Minerva.

His heart thumps with agitation, and yes, anticipation. The threat level has yet to be determined, but Draco believes in expecting the worst. If Hogwarts is in danger, then it's Draco's job to defend it. He taps his wand against the stone, tracing a path of rust-colored lichen. The answer to the mystery is so close, he growls in frustration. He's seen this image. He's seen it recently. Within the last few days.

He spends several minutes studying the mural, memorizing it, before turning back to the safety of firmer ground. Students scatter when he cuts through the east entrance, and he laughs out loud, not because he's feeling evil or vindictive, but because it's funny. If they only knew: Draco can't so much as step on a

spider these days without losing his lunch. Not that that protection will extend to whoever might be threatening the castle. That is a different matter altogether.

He's so sure of this, in fact, that it stops him dead in his tracks halfway across the courtyard. His heart contracts like it's caught in a vise, his ears ring, and his vision goes grey around the edges.

For Hogwarts, he'd hurt someone. He might even kill them. Draco shakes himself and stumbles forward on lead feet. At the first opportunity, he needs to puzzle out the complex tangle of justifications that live in his head.

Because he swore he'd never love again. And he meant it.

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It hits him the moment he enters his office. The picture that was on the castle wall stares back at him from the surface of his desk. It's his latest confiscated contraband: the newest issue of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. On the cover, Martin stands on a knoll. He has his hands lifted to the sky, and a flock of black crows circle high above him.

"Don't leave me!" Martin yells, the words appearing over and over in his speech bubble.

The crows circle, eerily silent, without even a 'caw caw' for dramatic effect.

But for the fact that the picture's moving, the images are identical, and Draco stands with his index finger pressed to his lips for several seconds while he tries to puzzle out the connection. Nothing adds up. But one thing is for certain: there's nobody on the outside of the castle wall. So the origin of the mystery must be within.

He takes a moment to hang up his soggy cloak and remove his robes, then stretches his neck from side to side, loosening the muscles. Placing his wand between his teeth, he spins his arms forward, then backward, wincing at the pull in his shoulders, even if it's a welcome ache. He feels wonderful. On edge. Loose and supple and ready for a fight, should one come to him.

Argus was said to have been more familiar with Hogwarts than anyone else, a fact that Draco thinks is probably up for debate, but no one has challenged the claim yet, and he doesn't plan to be the first. The man did keep an extensive set of maps of the castle, many of which impressed Draco with their detail when he first found them. He refers to one now. What is on the opposite side of the lichen-covered wall?

Nothing, apparently. Draco scowls and leans closer to the parchment. The map shows a crisscross of passages and rooms, but none near that wall, which is odd enough that Draco immediately suspects trickery.

"No way through, you say?" he addresses the parchment. "We'll see about that."

Wand tingling against his palm, he goes hunting.

For the first time since Draco's returned to Hogwarts, he feels the castle working against him. It stings, like his best friend has insulted him, but he presses on. Staircases swing away the moment he tries to step on them. More than one passageway ends before it should, forcing him to backtrack. The third time it happens, Draco smacks his fist against the stone. "Open up!" he shouts, angry and frustrated.

"Mr Malfoy."

Minerva's prim voice makes him spin around. When he realizes his wand is up and at the ready, and shaking—how mortifying—he lowers it, and pulls a deep breath through his nose. "Professor." He'll never be comfortable calling her Minerva to her face.

Her mouth purses, and her eyes shift to the wall behind him. "Is there a problem?"

"No." Draco pulls himself straight. He's got six inches on the witch, and since height is his only advantage, he makes the most of it. "Just the castle having a bit of fun."

The words are out before he realizes how they sound, but Minerva cracks a smile, even if it doesn't reach her eyes. "Albus used to say that Hogwarts had the best sense of humor of us all."

That one sentence shouldn't hurt like it does. Draco hates it, hates her at that moment, that she can tear him down so innocently. Albus Dumbledore used to say a lot of things. Some of those things were even directed at Draco, and almost all of them were kind. Draco swallows and nods his acknowledgment. Hindsight, he's learned, is the most painful of curses.

Minerva is eyeing the wall again. When she catches Draco watching her, she folds her hands inside her sleeves. "Carry on, Mr Malfoy." She sweeps away, robes swaying, the hem brushing the dusty floor and coming away soiled. Draco's eyes narrow. The entire floor is layered with dust. The corridor smells of disuse. So what had Minerva been doing here in the first place?

"Questions and more questions," he mumbles to himself and turns back to the wall.

It's gone. A dark hall stretches away into the distance.

Draco cups a hand over his mouth while he thinks. "Very well," he says after a minute, and walks into the gloom, boots clacking on the bare stone.

He travels by instinct; he's always had an excellent sense of direction. He was the only one in his year who never got lost in the Slytherin dungeons, not even once. The more he reflects, however, the more he has to wonder what role Hogwarts has in who loses their way and who doesn't.

The numbers of doors and halls lessen as he travels deeper into the castle. Draco enters a narrow passage, barely the width of his shoulders, and follows it through twists and turns, down one flight of stairs, then another. The air turns moist, and when his shoulder brushes the wall, it comes away damp.

He's beginning to doubt himself when all of a sudden he makes a sharp turn and comes up short.

Another dead end.

The walls are close, pressing in, and there's very little echo—a bit tomb-like for Draco's tastes. He lit his wand a half hour ago, but he's tired, and it's beginning to sputter. The cracked mortar leaks a steady stream of water in places, and a coppery smell fills the air, coating his tongue. The physical clues are telling him there's nothing here, and the urge to turn around and go back is so compelling that Draco breaks out in a sweat.

"No!" he says, loud enough to startle himself, and immediately he can breathe easier. "No." He pushes on, and what he finds at the end of the passageway makes his heart leap with a childlike excitement, the kind he hasn't felt in years.

It's not a dead end. The wall is built to trick the eye. In fact, the stonework is matched to such exactness that even Draco is impressed. The passageway continues on a sharp right turn, the walls so close he has to turn sideways to slither through. A part of his brain begins to clamor a warning. What does he really expect to find here? There's barely enough room to breathe, let alone wave a wand. And why would anyone want to?

The mystery drives him onward.

Eventually, the walls open up, curling back like the top of a potion beaker, and Draco steps into a large antechamber. The trickling water is gone, as is the chill. A puff of warm air breaks across his face, and his nostrils flare. He smells cinnamon. Yeast. The odor is so sharp, so real, that Draco's mouth begins to water. His stomach growls.

The large hall is in shadow, lit only by his wand. No matter. Draco follows his nose. At the other side he finds an arched door cut into the stone, and that's not all.

He finds Teddy Lupin.

The child is just inside the doorway, sitting cross-legged on a worn rug playing a game of wizard's chess. A wall-mounted torch throws flickering light over the scene. Teddy's opponent is a stuffed toy crup with a ripped ear and a forked yarn tail. One of its glass eyes is missing. It looks well-loved in a macabre sort of way.

"Teddy," Draco says quietly, almost to himself. He's surprised… and yet he isn't.

Someone has charmed the crup. Potter, probably. It slants its plush face toward the sound of Draco's voice and stares with one glass eye before yipping and dashing away into the darkness.

"Uh-oh," Teddy says, as eloquent as every other child Draco has ever known. "Uncle Harry is not going to like this."

"I bet not," Draco agrees.

To prepare himself for the conversation ahead, he draws a deep breath, and his lungs fill more easily than they have in nine days, he realizes. Seeing the child alive and well—and not looking sick at all, to be honest—causes the knot of worry in his chest to loosen. The burning sensation at the base of his sternum that he hadn't noticed before this very moment slackens.

He lowers himself to the rug, taking the crup's place. "Who was winning?"

Teddy puffs up. "Me!" He stabs a finger at his chest. His hair, a dull mousy brown, goes magenta at the roots. He grins at Draco, revealing a somewhat incomplete set of teeth.

Draco shudders a bit. "My faith is restored. Although your toy is probably a more challenging opponent than your uncle will ever be."

Teddy's smile is shy, unsure. He jumps topics. "How did you find us, Draco?"

No surprise that the brat recognizes him. Nonetheless, it derails his next question, which would have been What the hell are you doing down here?

Biding his time, Draco studies the game board. Teddy had been winning, but not by much, and once again Draco gets distracted. He waves his hand at the sprawl of chess pieces. "What sort of strategy is this?"

Teddy blinks and stares blankly at the chess board. "What do you mean?"

Well that answers that. Draco scratches his temple with the tip of his wand. "I suppose Uncle Harry taught you how to play."

Teddy looks delighted, the fool. "Yeah! How'd you know that?"

"Educated guess," Draco says with a smirk. "And the fact that your stuffed toy was about to put you in check."

Teddy's eyes go round and he leans over the board, shaggy hair falling into his face. When he next sits back, tears are shining in his eyes.

Draco groans.

"I'm not good at games." Teddy sniffs, then wipes his nose on his sleeve. The magenta fades from his hair.

Perfect. Now the urchin is crying, and Draco has yet to pry a single useful piece of information from him. He reaches awkwardly across the board and pats Teddy on the arm. The boy feels bone-thin beneath his

jumper. Fragile. "Now I'm positive that's not true," Draco croons, reassessing Teddy's state of health. "And if you like, I'll instruct you on a few essential strategies."

Teddy doesn't trust him. The sad, blank look is proof of that, and Draco can't believe he actually cares, but, yes—that's anger crawling up his chest. He's affronted. Now children are questioning his honor? He tips Teddy's chin up until they're eye to eye. "I promise," Draco says. "You will never lose to your crup again."

In his youth, he and his mates had shared a secret sign. Not that Muggle nonsense about crossing one's heart. It had been a salute, a show of respect. He uses it now, bringing three fingers to touch the center of his forehead. A flash of panic takes him. Maybe Teddy won't understand. But in the next instant, another toothless smile breaks over the boy's face, and he echoes Draco's salute, touching three grubby fingers to his brow.

The proper response would be a thank you, not that Draco gets one. Instead, Teddy launches himself across the board, and in a completely inappropriate gesture of affection, throws his arms around Draco's neck. The chess pieces scatter, their tinny voices shouting in annoyance.

For Merlin's sake, the boy might as well have been raised by wolves.

"I'm glad you're here." Teddy's voice is soft and wobbly against Draco's neck. "It gets lonely."

Then let's leave, Draco prepares himself to say, but he never gets the chance.

Potter arrives, toy crup at his heels. When he sees Teddy in Draco's lap, he stumbles to a stop. His breath is whistling through his lungs, and he's shaking. Oh, how Draco would like to imagine that it's fear making Potter's hands tremble, but that's just a leftover fantasy from his childhood. More likely, Potter's angry, a possibility that makes Draco feel a little faint.

"Malfoy," Potter says, with the same level of wonder and surprise that Draco had used upon discovering Teddy. "What are you doing here?"

Truly an inane question, but then again, had Potter acted rather than tried to reason through things, Draco would probably be dead. "The castle led me."

Potter shakes his head. He steps back against the wall; it seems to steady him. "I don't believe that. The main reason I chose Hogwarts was because I knew I'd be safe here."

Ah, Potter is still so easy to manipulate. "Then clearly I'm of no threat to you." He strokes Teddy's hair as he says this, and the child sighs. Potter's wand shakes one last time, then drops to his side, and Draco has to bite back a smile. Gryffindors trust as easily as newborn kittens.

Potter's no kitten, though. He's still shivering, eyes half-lidded, with an expression of hopeless confusion decorating his face. Draco sees now that Teddy's excessive thinness is catching. Potter borders on gaunt, his skin so pale that the veins pulse visibly beneath his skin. His hair is a mess; that's no different than usual. But it's shaggy, dull, and lies lifeless against his forehead. Black smudges underline his bloodshot eyes. He reminds Draco of….

His breath hitches. If Potter were holding a numbered plate to his chest—and screaming—he could pass for as escaped Sirius Black.

Draco shakes the image away. "What's going on here, Potter?"

Teddy stirs, answering the question when Potter doesn't. "I'm sick. And Uncle Harry is trying to make me better."

By drinking a bottle of Old Ogden's every night? Because that's what it looks like to Draco. He doubts Potter could even stand without the wall at his back.

Potter adds a low, gruff laugh into the mix. "I'll figure it out, Teddy. Don't worry." He passes a trembling hand over his face, then wraps his arms around his chest in a loose hug. His shivering hasn't abated, and

he seems at a loss for how to deal with Draco.

Fair enough. Draco's feeling much the same.

He shoos Teddy off his lap and stands, not unaware of how Potter stiffens or how the tip of his wand tracks Draco's movements. Eyes on Potter, he slips his own wand into his pocket, then reaches for Teddy's hand. "Surely there's someplace more comfortable we can continue this conversation." He inflects it as a statement. Better that than to give Potter a chance to say no, thank you for visiting, goodbye. Also, he wants to ensure Potter understands Draco won't be leaving until he has his questions answered.

Potter looks like he's bitten into a lemon. The grudging, "Yes, of course," holds a hefty dose of childish resentment. Why is it, Draco wonders as he steps forward, that circumstances always have them acting like ten-year-olds, no matter how many years have passed?

Clearly, Potter isn't happy about how Teddy's small hand is cradled in Draco's palm, or how the boy has accepted his presence without the slightest trace of fear or worry. No wonder, with half of the wizarding world looking for them, and his friends and family heading the charge. Potter no doubt believes Draco will divulge his whereabouts at the first opportunity.

He feels compelled to show that he's not the same person he used to be. It's not that he's proud; he has precious little pride anymore. Nor is it compassion for Potter's obvious plight. He can't cobble that emotion together with any great success either, and even if he could, he wouldn't feel it for Potter.

No, it's responsibility. He has a job, and while he doubts Potter would ever purposefully bring harm to Hogwarts, Draco must be vigilant. "I know only the very basics of your situation," he says, voice even. "I'm not here to expose you." That's true for now, at least. "But I am curious, and, of course, concerned for Teddy."

It isn't until he sees Potter's eyes widen that he realizes how much genuine emotion found its way into that last sentence.

Potter pushes off the wall, and Draco can't take his eyes off the way he's shivering. It's not particularly cold here. Drafty, maybe. But the air is dry and holds no chill. It's Potter that looks ill, frankly, not Teddy.

"This way," Potter says, gesturing. He smiles at Teddy, and the child rushes forward to tuck himself under Potter's arm. Draco follows, taking note of how much of Potter's weight the child bears.

They don't go far, through two additional dark, empty spaces, and then Potter is pushing open a door into a tidy suite of rooms. Teddy rushes in, leaving Potter to lean on the doorframe. He gestures Draco ahead of him. "Welcome to our humble prison."

The bit of drama tips Draco toward anger. Potter's never seen the inside of a prison, of that he's sure. If he had, he wouldn't be comparing this homey, well-lit place to one.

The door opens into a large space that appears to serve several functions. In one corner, two sofas sit on angles to a large fireplace. A thick rug lies between them, on which Draco can see a smattering of toys. On the other side of the room is a makeshift kitchen, and in the middle of the space, a solid, oversized table. Dirty dishes take up one corner, but the rest of the surface is covered by books, parchment, and ink bottles. A feathered quill rests atop of lily-white piece of parchment. Draco glides forward. Only two words are written at the top. "Sustainable strength". The third word begins "Co—" then the ink drags off the page in a thick, splotchy line.

Potter must have been writing when the crup found him. A nearby overturned chair supports that theory.

Another doorway beyond the fireplace leads to what Draco assumes is the bedroom. That door is mostly closed, snagged on a soiled shirt that's blocking the threshold. The entire space smells faintly of sour milk.

Potter clears the table with little ceremony, crumpling his notes in several places in order to reveal the tabletop beneath. "Would you like some tea?" he asks, and Draco can tell that the question hurts.

Which is why he accepts. "Yes, thank you."

Potter's hesitation might be surprise, or it might be his brain catching up with his manners. He glances over his shoulder to the kitchen. "I hope we have some."

They could Summon the tea, but Draco's willing to bet Potter doesn't even risk that for fear of exposure. "Never mind," he says when Potter shuffles over to rummage through a cupboard. "We can skip that part, if you like."

All it does is prolong the inevitable conversation—a conversation Draco is as eager to begin as Potter is reluctant.

Potter nods and returns to the table, glancing over at Teddy as he takes his seat. The boy is playing by the fire, fully engaged with his miniature dragons, but Potter flashes Draco a knowing smile. "He's listening."

"Do you mind?"

"No." The look he bestows on Teddy glows with fondness. "He already knows. He did a better job of accepting things than his grandmother did. All she wanted to believe was that his illness was related to Remus' lyncanthropy."

Time to move things along. "Then it is a curse?" Draco asks.

Potter's smile turns wry. He peels his gaze away from Teddy and turns it on Draco. "So you know some of what's been happening."

"Only what that gossipmonger Poppy tells me," Draco lies. This is no time to mention the letter from his father. "The boy is sick, but not, is that right? You took him because you believe that his affliction is the result of a curse, and his family refuses to accept that belief."

"It is a curse. I know that much." Potter folds his hands on the table. Now that he's begun the tale, he rushes ahead. "It started out as nothing, really. He felt tired all the time, lost his appetite. But then he'd seem to get better."

"These periods of recovery didn't last?" Draco guesses.

"No. They got shorter, and the sickness, when it returned, was worse each time. It was as though—" Potter pauses and presses his lips into a thin line. "—his life was being sucked away. And nothing we did stopped it. Nothing we tried even slowed it down."

Draco scratches idly at his forehead. "Poppy said Aunt Andromeda took him to healers."

"Yes. A million of them."

"And their conclusion?"

Potter spreads his hands. "They had none. I told her that he'd been cursed, but that didn't make any difference. She thought Teddy belonged at St. Mungo's. Hermione agreed."

Obviously, this last fact bothers Potter the most.

"How did you deduce it was a curse?" That's the part Draco is most curious about.

Potter doesn't speak at first. His eyes drift to Teddy, Draco's follow, and they both watch the boy try to be circumspect about his eavesdropping. Draco keeps his next words low, barely audible. "Would you like me to cast a Silencing Charm?"

He means it to be a serious inquiry, but Potter laughs and collapses back in his chair. "Don't bother. He'll hear right through it. Besides, it's nothing he doesn't already know."

Very well. Draco waves at Potter to continue.

"I received a letter," Potter says next. "Untraceable. It… made it clear that Teddy had been targeted. As an act of revenge."

"Revenge?"

Revenge isn't a concept Draco puts much stock in these days. He's outgrown it, like an old winter coat with too-short sleeves and buttons that refuse to fasten no matter how much you pull and tug.

He opens his mouth to inquire after the letter, but Potter said untraceable, and if Potter couldn't discover its origin, then it's a definite dead end. Still, it troubles him, and he knows why. How many people could manage such powerful unplottable magic? The list can't be long.

Draco's father would be on it.

He darts a glance at Potter, fearing somehow that his thoughts are plain, but Potter isn't even looking at him. Draco glances sideways at Teddy.

Unlike Potter, the boy is watching him. And he's frowning.

Draco's mouth floods with saliva. He swallows and asks, "What did you mean when you said that he'd hear right through a Silencing Charm?"

Potter nods. "That's because of the transfer." He smiles at Draco's blank stare. "I'm giving him my power in order to keep him… healthy. Needless to say, he's more skilled in practical magic than most children

his age."

"He's taking your magic?"

"I'm giving it to him," Potter says, enunciating through clenched teeth.

Draco has rarely heard such a trifling distinction.

"A little at a time, but we have to do it often," Potter adds.

"Ah," is Draco's witty reply. And this is to keep the boy healthy? Teddy is noticeably unhealthy. He's rail-thin. Brittle-looking. How would he be faring without Potter's magic? Not very well, is Draco's guess. Probably not at all. "You're keeping him alive."

"For now." Potter whispers it, and not out of deference to Teddy's delicate sensibilities. Not if the boy is powerful enough to hear through a Silencio. "It takes a lot out of me," Potter says. "I'm not going to lie."

An understatement if Draco has ever heard one. Potter looks half dead. "Lucky that you found a way to…" Postpone the inevitable? "... alleviate the symptoms." Draco stumbles over the words, hating that the conversation is leaving him so unsettled.

Potter's bark of laughter doesn't help. Draco has to admit that his nerves are as frayed as the crup's tail, and Potter's aren't too far behind, apparently.

"Oh, it wasn't luck," Potter says, gnawing on the last word. "The details of the transfer spell were in the letter."

"Ah," Draco says again, impressed and horrified in equal measure. Whoever is out to get Potter must hate him very much. What better way to cause pain than to offer hope, only to have it amount to

nothing? And in the end, they might both die, Teddy and Potter. Frankly, it's a bloody brilliant plan.

The tension in the room has gone from intense to unbearable. Draco grabs for a way to diffuse it. "There's something happening on the outside of the castle."

Potter blinks at him. "What?"

"That's how I found you," Draco says. He points to the corner of the room, where the fireplace is nestled. "On the outside of that wall, some things have been happening."

Potter squints at the wall, then back at Draco. Teddy does the same. "You realize," Potter says, "that that wall faces a cliff."

"I do."

"So what were you doing there? It's treacherous, especially this time of year."

Draco doesn't answer. He doesn't owe Potter an explanation. Instead he talks about the white heather and the lichen mural. Potter's eyes grow incrementally wider during the retelling until he looks rather comical. Draco would laugh, but Potter's face has lost all its color as well, and that's not the slightest bit funny.

"Shit," Potter says, succinctly.

They both look at Teddy.

"I told you he's been absorbing my magic." More worry lines etch Potter's forehead. "I hadn't realized it was manifesting, though."

Teddy abandons his dragons for his crup and hugs it close to his chest. "I'm not doing it on purpose."

"I'm positive that's true," Draco assures him, more unsettled than ever.

"It's probably happening when he's asleep." Potter drops his head into his hands. "When there isn't a chance of stopping it."

Perhaps you should have thought of that before giving a seven-year-old child more power than a hundred full-grown wizards? Draco aches to snap. The temptation to mock is right below the surface, but the compulsion is dull with age; years have passed since he's let his emotions rule his actions. He stands. "I thought you should know."

He's taken four steps toward the door when he hears Potter's chair scrape back from the table. "Malfoy!"

Draco turns. He purposefully keeps his eyes off Teddy. "Yes?"

"That's it?"

Draco nods. "Your secret's safe. For the time being."

A vague promise, but he feels comfortable making it. He's found nothing here today that directly threatens Hogwarts.

What tomorrow holds is anyone's guess.

Go To Part Two

Two

Three days later, the castle leads Draco to Ravenclaw Tower. Several sets of staircases wind through this section, but only two move. The others never did, at least to Draco's knowledge. He never spent an inordinate amount of time around Ravenclaws while in school. Tucked into a lesser-used corridor, he finds a set of stairs that lead up and out of sight. He squints, but can't make out how far they go. He can see that steps are missing in several places, blasted away during the final battle of the war. The wood looks dangerously jagged and unsteady.

This particular staircase doesn't seem all that spectacular or important. Surely it never moved.

The sputter of magic he feels when he touches his wand to the shattered wood proves him wrong. Draco sits on the bottom step and considers. He's repaired a few moving staircases in his tenure as caretaker, and it's never easy. That will be especially true today. Sleep has been elusive the past few nights since he found Teddy and Potter. His lower back aches, and there's a twinge in his right shoulder when he twists to the left. His brain feels sluggish. If he were smart, he'd save this task for another day.

The thought of shirking his duties makes him surly, so when he registers a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, his Stunner is particularly vicious. He hears a startled yelp, but no thump to indicate a body has hit the floor. Curious, he rises and steps around the corner to investigate.

Teddy's stuffed crup is lying on its back, all four paws in the air, its forked yarn tale tucked between its back legs.

Draco snorts. He points his wand at the crup. "What are you doing sneaking about?"

Frozen, the crup stares at him with one glass eye.

"Answer," Draco demands, infusing his voice with as much menace as he can manage. "Or I'll make a pillow out of you."

It's impossible not to laugh when he hears a horrified gasp from somewhere close by. "Come out, Teddy," he calls, "and be prepared to answer for your toy's transgressions."

"Answer for his what?"

The boy steps into view. He's been hiding behind a nearby tapestry of Rowena Ravenclaw, one of the more beautiful renditions hanging about the castle. She stands with one hand outstretched, hair flowing over her shoulders in an artful tangle. The diadem rests on her head. Strangely, there's a lion cub at her feet, mostly hidden by the folds of her robe.

Teddy notices Draco's distraction and follows his gaze. "Why is Godric with her?"

Draco doesn't question the child's assumption. History of Magic was one of his best subjects, and he knows all there is to know about the Founders. The adventures of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw are as infamous as they are numerous: there had been something between those two.

Before he can answer, a door bangs open. Then another. Voices fill the corridor. Teddy flies to Draco and clutches his robes. "Nobody's supposed to see me!"

"I see you," Draco points out.

"You're different."

He says it by rote, as if used to hearing the words. Potter's words, no doubt. How does he mean them, though? The question bothers Draco more than it should, but there's no time to reflect on it now. He

sweeps Teddy behind the tapestry, then ducks in beside him when the boy refuses to release his hold on Draco's robes.

"Wait!" Teddy cries just as the first footfalls enter the corridor. He slithers out of Draco's grip and pushes the tapestry to the side.

"Teddy!"

The rest of Draco's reprimand dies in his throat when Teddy stretches an arm out toward his crup. He's not holding a wand and he says nothing. Nothing. Still, the toy flies across the hall and into his hand. Released from Draco's spell, the toy yips softly and licks Teddy's face with a pink felt tongue. Teddy giggles and snuggles it close.

Draco's legs begin to shake. Teddy lifts his head and says something, but Draco can't hear it over the rush of blood in his ears. He raises a finger to his lips—it's only trembling a little—and Teddy nods, going still. Students bustle by, and for once, Draco wishes they would linger.

Apparently, Potter hadn't been joking about transferring his power, because Teddy Lupin can not only do wandless magic, he doesn't need to even verbalize his spells. In Draco's lifetime, he's only known of three wizards with that ability. Two are dead, and the third looks to have one foot already in the grave.

Silence returns to the hall, but Teddy doesn't move. Draco's grateful for the few extra seconds to think. He's standing next to a boy who could probably crush him with nothing more than an unkind thought. Potter told him that Teddy was powerful, that he was responsible for the feats of magic Draco had seen outside the castle, and Draco had heard. But he hasn't listened.

Maybe because he hadn't wanted to believe.

He's so wrapped up in his thoughts that Teddy's quiet sobs don't register immediately. When Draco pushes the tapestry back and light flows into the space, he sees that Teddy has his stuffed crup pressed to his face. Its matted fur is wet with his tears.

Draco swallows until his mouth doesn't feel so dry, then asks, "What's wrong, Teddy?"

Teddy shakes his head, refusing to answer. His misery is plain in the defeated slump of his shoulders. Concern stirs in Draco, displacing some of his other conflicting emotions. He sinks to one knee, putting them face to face. "Teddy." He strokes a lock of damp hair away from the boy's face. "Please tell me what's wrong."

He expects his plea to fall on deaf ears. Children can be so dramatic. But no… Teddy meets his eyes. He searches Draco's face, and what he's looking for is impossible say, but eventually he sighs. It catches on a sob, but no more tears fall.

"You're mad at me," he states.

"Not at all," Draco replies. It's the truth.

"You're scared of me," Teddy rejoins, and Draco chokes on his flippant reply.

"A bit," he says. "You startled me, that's all."

Teddy nods and fiddles with his crup's tail. "I'm not supposed to show anybody what I can do."

"No?" Good advice, Potter, Draco thinks.

"Uncle Harry says people won't understand why I can do magic without a wand. And that I'll scare them."

Potter has the truth of it. Andromeda would probably wet herself, and Merlin knows what the rest of

them would do. He pats Teddy's hand. "I won't tell. Don't worry."

Teddy shakes his head. Agitated, he picks desperately at the crup's yarn tail. Draco's beginning to see how it ended up so frayed. He cups his fingers over Teddy's, stilling their nervous movements. "I said I wouldn't tell, and I meant it."

"You're afraid of me now." He sniffs. "Uncle Harry was right about everything."

Now that's something Draco won't abide. Potter doesn't get to be right about everything. The crup is starting to whimper, so Draco untangles its tail from Teddy's restless fingers and places his hands on the boy's shoulders. "You scared me for a minute," he admits. "But I'm not scared anymore. And I do understand why you can do these things, remember?"

"Are they bad? Am I bad?" Teddy whispers. The idea has obviously been haunting the child for some time. Draco turns the question back at him.

"Where is the magic coming from?"

Teddy rolls his eyes. "From Uncle Harry."

"Is he bad?"

"No!"

Draco doesn't answer, just inclines his head, acknowledging the fact and coaxing Teddy to make the connection for himself. A moment later, the boy smiles. "Okay."

There's a lack of conviction in the child's voice that bothers Draco. He takes Teddy's hand and leads him to the base of the staircase. "Teddy, the only thing that makes magic Dark or Light is how you use it." It's

not strictly true, but will suffice for the moment. "Here," Draco says, pointing at the dilapidated staircase. "Before the Battle of Hogwarts, this staircase used to move."

Teddy makes a face. "I hate those things."

Draco can agree simply by counting the number of times he's fallen on his face while using one. Still… "They serve a function. And they're part of Hogwarts."

Teddy's face twists into a serious frown. He looks skeptical, but he nods.

"This one needs repairing." Draco slips his wand from his pocket, then makes a show of pushing up his sleeves. "It's hard work. The spells requires a great deal of concentration and a lot of powerful magic."

By now, Teddy's bouncing on his toes. "I have powerful magic! Can I help?"

Tapping his wand against his chin, Draco looks him over with a critical eye.

"Please?"

"Caring for Hogwarts is a grave responsibility," Draco says, dropping all the levity from his tone.

"I know."

Draco arches a brow. "Oh, you know?"

"The castle told me."

What can he say? It's probably the truth. "Very well." He reaches for Teddy's hand. "You won't know the spells I'm using, but you can help anyway."

"How?"

"Just relax," Draco mutters. He's focusing his own power now. Once the job starts, there's no stopping in the middle. It would be like erecting a roof and expecting it to stand without walls to support it. He's taking a risk, involving Teddy. Potter wouldn't approve, he's sure. But then Potter didn't see the look in the boy's eyes when he asked if he were evil. Potter has probably never agonized over such a thing.

Draco has.

"Close your eyes," he whispers. "Follow my lead."

They aren't the most specific of instructions. Teddy's only seven—and a young seven, at that—but Draco has a feeling that the boy has been lacking in chances to prove himself lately. Plus, he's curious. Just how has Potter's influx of magic influenced Teddy's own capabilities?

Teddy takes Draco's hand without any prompting. "I can… see," he says.

Sorting through the statement takes longer than Draco would like, and in the end, all he replies is, "See what?"

"How you want it to look. If you could make it perfect." And then he smiles. "I'm going to help."

They've covered this topic, have they not? "Yes, that's the id—"

And that's when Teddy lends his power to the spell. The breath rushes from Draco's lungs, just as it does when he's riding his racing broom. Teddy's magic braids through Draco's, taking note of how the spell means to piece the stairway together, then—like an eager puppy—dashes off to make it happen. It's intuitive magic of the highest degree, and all Draco can do is cling to the reins and do his best to steer. The air pulses around them, and the castle sings.

Teddy tugs on his hand. "Hogwarts is happy."

Hogwarts isn't the only one. Teddy's grin threatens to split his face.

The restoration looks effortless. Indeed, Draco feels almost no drain at all, yet this is no makeshift repair. The railings gleam with polish. The newel posts at each landing boast intricate carvings. Dragons, of course. As the repairs progress, the stairway begins to move, creaking and stretching after its long sleep.

Draco drops his wand to his side, abandoning the pretense that he's influencing what's happening, and lets Teddy finish the work. The enthusiasm trickles out of the boy slowly; he doesn't want to stop, but there's simply no more to be done. The decrepit stairway is now the most beautiful and elaborate in the castle. It swings back and forth above them, dancing.

It's not exactly subtle. Draco expects the gossip will be prodigious.

"Did I do all right?" Teddy bites his lip.

Draco grins down at him. "Teddy," he says, "you are very, very good at this game."

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They're only halfway back to Potter's hidey-hole when Teddy stumbles. Draco catches his arm, waiting

for the boy to regain his feet, which he does, albeit slowly.

"I'm tired," Teddy says, melting against Draco's side. His voice wavers.

Draco brings his wand around, illuminating Teddy's pale face. His eyelids flutter against his cheeks and his breath comes in shallow pants. Draco's stomach twists in a strong cramp, and he bends to scoop the child into his arms. "Almost there," he croons, trying for a reassuring tone, as much for himself as for Teddy. Potter will skin him if anything happens to the boy on his watch.

Teddy dozes for the last part of the journey. He's small, but not insubstantial. A featherweight charm would be the ticket, but Draco's not sure if casting spells at the child is a good idea, so he bears his weight without complaint.

He finds Potter asleep, bent over a jumble of loose parchment, a cup of cold tea clutched in his hand. Draco stands over him for a long time, noting the scruffy beginnings of a beard and the ink caked under his fingernails, then carries Teddy into the next room and tucks him into bed. It's only the middle of the day, but the curse steals the boy's strength in unpredictable increments, at least that's the way Potter explained it.

He pulls the door closed behind him and turns to find Potter awake and watching. Neither of them seem inclined to speak, and in fact, neither of them move until the crup jumps onto the table and dips his face in Potter's teacup.

Potter makes a sound of disgust. "You're not really alive, you know," he says, swiping at the toy's stained mouth with the corner of a napkin. He pushes it off the table. "For the last time, stay out of my tea."

Draco slides into a seat across from Potter. "It looks as though your charm needs some fine-tuning."

"Teddy did it," Potter answers. He shuffles the paper into a messy stack. "He was lonely. It's been hard on him, having to stay cooped up down here. I knew he was straying farther and farther, but I didn't expect him to go so far as to bother you." Potter's attempt to tame the pile of paper fails as several pieces

escape and drift to the floor. He tosses the rest of the mess on top of it, then slams a fist on the table.

It doesn't matter that Potter is so weak he can barely warm his tea. Draco still jumps.

Potter runs his fingers through his filthy hair. "Sorry."

"You might think more clearly if you were rested," Draco suggests. "And clean," he adds. He pokes through the scattered parchment with his toe. There looks to be more words scratched out than not. "Research never was your forte."

Dull eyes fixed on the floor, Potter shakes his head. "No."

"Have you considered the Restricted Section?" It is, after all, where something like this would be found.

"Once. When we first got here." Potter sits back with a grimace, scratching at his stubbled chin. "But I didn't have any idea where to start. And I didn't want to leave Teddy alone for too long."

Draco knows where he would start. He's spent his fair share of time in the restricted area of the library. One or two promising tomes come to mind. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Tries again, but with no success. Across the table, Potter's bemused smile mocks him.

"I can have a look around for you," Draco is finally able to make himself say, and in the end it's worth it, because judging by the look on Potter's face, Draco might as well have said, "I love you."

Now it's Potter's turn to gape like a fish. "You'd do that?"

Under no circumstances is he repeating his offer. Once was difficult enough. "Could you give me a clue about what I should be looking for?"

Potter scribbles a hasty list. Draco slips it into his pocket without reading it and prepares to leave. That's quite enough civility for one day.

Teddy's cries stop him in his tracks. "Uncle Harry! Uncle Harry!" A choking gasp follows the screams.

Potter jumps from his seat with more speed than Draco would have thought him capable of and dashes into the bedchamber. Draco follows more slowly. When he passes through the doorway, he sees Potter perched on the edge of Teddy's small bed, cradling him close while the boy gasps for air.

By the time Draco reaches the bedside, Teddy is turning blue. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of the scene is the boy's eerie calm. He's watching Potter with wide, frightened eyes, but he's not struggling—the body's instinctive response to suffocation.

"That's right, Teddy," Potter says, maneuvering himself around so that they're stretched out next to each other. "It'll be over in a minute. Try to stay calm. You're such a good boy. Such a brave boy."

Teddy begins to twitch. The gasping morphs into a high-pitched wheeze that makes the hair on the back of Draco's neck stand on end. Potter's voice holds more than a touch of fear.

"Please, Teddy. I know. I know. Shhh." Potter curls their bodies together and places one hand on Teddy's forehead. "You know how this works. Just try to relax." He closes his eyes, his lips begin to move, and snatches of an incantation reach Draco's ears. This must be the transfer spell Potter spoke about. He waits a few feet away, silent, although he could be invisible for all the attention he's getting at the moment.

Potter chants the spell, and nothing happens… unless Draco counts how Teddy's eyes roll back in his head. His respirations fall to one every several seconds. Potter's voice begins to break, cracking over the ancient Latin. "Come on, Teddy," he says. "You have to stay with me. Please. Please don't—"

Die, Draco finishes in his head. Please don't die. He yanks himself back from the edge of panic. Merlin

knows the situation doesn't need any additional hysteria.

What it requires is a distraction.

He circles the bed, and, after a brief tug of war with his pride, squeezes onto the thin mattress. "Teddy," he says right into the child's ear. "Listen to me now. Have you ever seen a French Bluebelly dragon?"

Potter lifts his head from Teddy's hair and stares at Draco through his lopsided, fogged glasses. Draco ignores him.

"They're unlike most other dragons," Draco says, unconcerned, as if the three of them cuddle up on the boy's bed everyday to watch him asphyxiate. "Mostly because there's nothing a French Bluebelly loves more than pretending to be a wizard. It's the absolute truth. I had one join me for dinner once. He flew right into my garden, sat down at my table, laid his napkin on his lap, and shared my meal. Watching the poor fellow try to hold a fork was very entertaining."

Is Teddy listening? He doesn't seem to be getting any worse, so Draco continues. "It all went well until he tried to sip the wine… and ended up taking a bite out of the glass. I suggested he finish what he started—what was I going to do with half a wine goblet—and so he did, crunching the rest of it up in two bites, neat as you please."

Lips pressed to Teddy's cheek, Potter begins to mutter the incantation again. Judging by the tingle on Draco's skin, the spell has taken hold this time. Teddy's inhalations grow less labored, and he turns his head toward the sound of Potter's voice. When he lifts a tiny hand and presses it to Potter's cheek, Potter's voice stutters on what could be a sob, but his eyes never leave Draco's face.

Draco holds his stare. "We enjoyed each other's company so much that I invited him to stay." The scene has turned dreamlike. Fleeting. Draco keeps his voice soft, unwilling to dispel it. "But he refused. He had a family waiting for him in the forest."

"Then what happened?" Teddy asks, slurring his words.

At the question, Potter closes his eyes.

"I simply invited them all," Draco says. "It made for a crowded table, and I must say, those tails did cause some havoc."

Teddy giggles.

"But they really were very polite, as far as dragons go. There is one thing I should warn you about, though, in case you ever find yourself in a similar situation."

Teddy turns his head to look at Draco with damp, red-rimmed eyes. They're almost a perfect match for Potter's, Draco can't help but notice. He leans close and whispers, "Don't make them laugh. They'll set your tablecloth on fire."

The boy's answering grin is infectious, even if it feels inappropriate to be smiling so soon after a crisis. "Do you think I'll ever meet a French Bluebelly dragon?" Teddy asks.

"One day, perhaps." It's as far as Draco's willing to go, since the future is a touchy topic at the moment. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," Teddy says, and that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, is Draco's cue to leave. He smoothes the boy's hair from his brow and begins to pull away, but Potter catches his hand and holds it there.

Of the thousands of ways to restrain a person—in anger, in desperation, in lust—they've only ever touched each other with hatred in their hearts. A kinder soul could name it disdain, but Draco knows the truth. He aches to snatch his hand back, throw an insult, make a scene, but he does none of these things, his inertia so complete that he doesn't even blink.

"He'll sleep now," Potter says. "Probably for several hours."

A glance at the boy's face confirms it. He's asleep, deep, full breaths lifting his chest every few seconds. Potter, however, is acting like he just tried to go swimming in the lake. Lips tinged blue, teeth chattering, he holds Draco's hand against Teddy's hair. "Sorry," he stutters. "The cold. It's a side effect of the spell."

Draco clamps down on the chivalrous impulse to pull the blanket over Potter's shivering form. "Will it last long?"

Potter shrugs, dismissing the question without answering, so, yes, it must last for hours. Merlin save him from prideful Gryffindors. Draco slides his wand from his pocket and Summons the blankets from the larger bed, then cuts off Potter's thank you with a question. "Do his attacks usually come on so suddenly?"

"No. And we just did the transfer spell last night. I don't understand how he got so bad so quickly." Potter burrows under the blankets and closes his eyes. Somehow, that makes Draco's confession easier.

"That's my fault, in all likelihood," he admits. He tells Potter about the staircase, but he doesn't explain why he had Teddy help. Maybe his subconscious is testing the other man. Or maybe Draco's just a coward.

Regardless, the debate becomes moot when Potter says, "He needed to see himself do something good with his magic. Something tangible." He nods and his icy fingers give Draco's a squeeze. "You did the right thing. I should have realized he was worried about his new abilities, but I truthfully had no idea." He huffs a bitter laugh. "I'm not so wonderful at this parenting thing."

Honestly, the nonsense that Potter spouts… "You do fine," Draco says. More than most. Maybe more than everyone. "He's lucky."

Potter arches an eyebrow. "Not so lucky, really."

"Lucky to have you here," Draco amends.

The conversation ends there, but only because Potter falls asleep.

Draco putters around the main room, stacking the few dishes, toeing Teddy's toys into a pile, and arranging Potter's papers into some semblance of order. There are a few places where he thinks Potter might be on to something, and he adds a few notes to that effect in the margins.

The stuffed crup watches from the back of the sofa, head tilted, glass eye following Draco around the room. Draco grabs him by the scruff of the neck and tosses him in the direction of the bedroom. "Get in there. He'll want you when he wakes up."

The crup runs off. Left with no other helpful tasks to perform, Draco does the same.

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The next morning should be routine. It's anything but.

Draco doesn't like to believe that he's a creature of habit, but there's no denying the evidence. When he leaves the Great Hall and turns left toward the main doors instead of right toward his office, the whispers begin. Students gawk and point. Outside the castle, the few souls who have braved the cold scatter when he steps through the door. Draco pays no attention. He walks with his head high and a smile on his face, and makes a note to be unpredictable more often.

He heads east, toward the forest, in case any curious eyes are watching. But once in the shadow of the Whomping Willow, he turns south and backtracks to the castle. Snowfall is so eminent that the air has an actual weight. Draco predicts wet, heavy flakes—the kind that stick together like glue and perch in clumps among the rocks on the cliff, defying the pull of gravity. The strength is an illusion, of course. It

doesn't take much to disturb the fragile relationship of stone and snowpack.

A vicious gust of wind snaps at his cloak as he makes the turn off the path and begins to climb over the rocks. It tugs him toward the drop. This is madness. Had it been any other morning, Draco would have turned back. But not today.

Today, there might be something waiting for him from Teddy.

He doesn't realize that anticipation is making him careless until he slips while rushing around the last corner. For a moment, he's weightless, terrified, then one of his boots catches the edge of a rock, the other a patch of bare earth, and he regains his balance. He blows out a relieved breath, raises his head, and freezes.

Three snow dragons stand guard by Teddy's wall.

For objects born of magic, they don't impress him as much as the lichen mural, but that doesn't matter in the slightest. Teddy has given him a sign, a perfect subconscious hiccup. Draco laughs, the joy rising from deep inside, insouciant and undeniable.

The largest of the creatures is several feet taller than Draco. It stands on its hindquarters, front claws spread wide, shielding the other two dragons. He's a handsome specimen, with coiled horns and a sharp snout, molded from the purest white snow… all except for his stomach, which Teddy has covered in glistening azure-tinted ice crystals. Draco studies the dragon's face, drawn to it for reasons he can't explain. The thing looks damn familiar. Considering, Draco turns to the other two, peeking around the first to get a better look.

The second is smaller, shorter than Draco. It, too, stands on its hind legs, quietly fierce, blue belly thrust forward. One of its snow claws rests on the back of the third dragon. Draco studies the sculptures, feeling as awed as he always does when viewing art, stunned by how the most subtle of poses brings life to the inanimate.

Again, inexplicably, a sense of déjà-vu takes him.

Settled between the first two, the third dragon reclines in the snow and has one foreleg curled around his small companion. In his other claw, he holds the tail of the tall protector. This is a family, Draco realizes, like in the story he told Teddy. The intimacy of the scene takes his breath away.

As do the pair of spectacles perched on the nose of the reclining dragon. They have thin rims and crook slightly to the left. Draco admires the level of detail. There's even a scratch on the right lens, just like on Potter's glasses...

Dizzy, Draco drops to his knees. The world shifts under him, tilts, and he's sliding, falling. Disoriented, he grabs for a handhold, but the snow slips through his fingers like powder.

Little by little, the vertigo fades. The earth steadies. The wind slices at his skin like a thousand sharp knives, and Draco lifts his head to see how far he's fallen.

He hasn't moved an inch.

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"What have you got there, Draco?"

Draco registers his name, but little else. He marks his place on the page before searching out the source of the question, frowning when he sees who's disturbed his peaceful corner of the library.

"Nothing," he says, closing the book even as Poppy cranes her neck for a better look. "What are you doing here?" He's only ever seen her in the Hospital Wing or the Great Hall. He realizes she isn't actually confined to these places, but that doesn't negate the strangeness of encountering her elsewhere.

"Research," she answers with a smile, but Draco's too distracted to bite the proverbial hook she's dangling.

"Was there something you needed?"

"No. But I did want to mention that you've been looking tired lately."

Draco's mirror had said the same thing that morning. There'd been some mention of his hair receding as well. "Be quiet," Draco had muttered, throwing a towel over the frame. There's no throwing a towel over Poppy, though. Pity.

"I appreciate your concern." He sets the book aside and picks up another.

"Somehow I doubt that. You'll come to me if you need anything?"

"Of course," he means to say, but the lie gets tangled behind his teeth. He won't, and she knows it. So why does she continue to offer? She can't enjoy their meaningless exchange of platitudes any more than he does. It makes no sense. Unless… to her, they aren't meaningless.

Rubbing a palm over his chest, he nods. "I'll keep your offer in mind."

"I'll try not to worry so much, in that case. Good luck with your research."

~~*

He isn't able to deliver the books until late that night.

Stepping through Potter's door is like sailing into a hurricane. Papers and other bric-a-brac whip around the room. Plates and cups collide midair, shattering into jagged pieces. Teddy stands in the middle of it all, crying, while Potter kneels by his side, blood gushing from his wrist.

Draco points his wand at the maelstrom. "Finite Incantatum." The tornado dies, and the objects that have been caught up by the gusts drop to the floor with a spectacular crash. The papers follow more sedately, drifting to the ground like autumn leaves.

Potter throws him a grateful look. He wipes his forehead with his injured hand, then folds it into the crook of his other elbow. Blood seeps through and drips to the floor in an irregular patter. "Please calm down, Teddy," Potter says. "It was an accident."

"I'm sorry I hurt you!" Teddy sobs.

A breeze brushes Draco's face. The papers rustle across the floor. "Teddy," Draco says, stepping forward before the boy's agitation can whip up another magical backlash. "I'm going to need your help. Are you listening?"

The air goes still. That's something, at least. Draco picks his way over the debris. "I need a clean cloth and a bowl of warm water. Can you fetch those for me?"

The boy nods through a shuddering sob and then seems to notice the destruction for the first time. His eyes go wide, and he spins in a circle. Draco nudges him back on task. "Teddy. The cloth and water." He guides Potter to the table as he speaks, waiting until Teddy has slipped into the bathroom to ask, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

Draco inspects the cut, leaving the lie alone for the moment. A deep gash runs from the inside of Potter's forearm to the middle of his palm. Had he been trying to commit suicide, Draco would have applauded his precision. He uses his wand to close the wound.

"You could have just said it was none of my business." Another flick of his wand clears the table enough to accept the water and cloth when it arrives.

Potter tips his head to the ceiling, blowing out a heavy breath. "We quarreled, and I let the whole stupid situation get to me. I'm just so…."

"Exhausted?" Draco ventures.

"Frustrated," Potter substitutes. "I shouldn't have let it escalate. Merlin knows he's dealing with enough stress at the moment."

And Potter isn't? Draco shakes his head. "And your injury?"

"When he got upset, things started flying. I saw a glass headed right for him, and I tried to intercept it." He lifts his arm a few inches. "With my hand."

"Quick thinking," Draco quips.

"He saw the blood and things went downhill from there."

"He needs to learn some control." Draco cuts off his next comment when Teddy appears in the doorway, a large bowl balanced in his arms. His crup trots at his heels, fluffy white towel clamped in its mouth.

"Are you okay, Uncle Harry?" Fresh tears shine in his eyes.

"Just fine," Potter assures him. "No harm done. I'm sorry I raised my voice."

There's a veritable obstacle course between Teddy and the table, and the bowl is filled to the brim. Draco levitates it out of his hands. "Thank you, Teddy."

It's a messy job. Potter's blood loss wasn't inconsequential, but no spell beats soap and water for a thorough cleansing. Draco works quickly and precisely, then banishes the pink water and soiled towel.

Teddy hovers the whole time. "Does it need a bandage?" he asks, laying a hand over the wound.

"No," Potter says. "Draco closed it up tight. It'll be tender for a day or so, that's all." He glances about, sighing. "I need to start putting things back together."

Draco's head snaps up. "You'll do no such thing."

"I'm fine."

Another debate for another time, but that isn't Draco's point. "Teddy will do it."

"I will?" They all pause to take stock of the disorder. Teddy bites his lip and sidles closer to Potter. "How?"

Draco needs to separate the two of them. Teddy is as much a crutch for Potter as he is for Teddy, and while a support system has its benefits, they don't extend to this. Draco walks to the center of the room and holds out his hand. Immediately, Teddy peels himself away from Potter and joins him. Draco crouches down, putting them eye to eye.

"You made the mess," he says. "So you need to clean it up."

"But… I didn't do it on purpose."

Draco throws Potter a quelling look when he tries to interrupt. Whether the boy's life expectancy is two days or two centuries, there are certain things he should know. They aren't easy lessons. The most important ones never are.

"Our lives are full of things we never mean to happen." Draco folds Teddy's hands in his. "Nevertheless, those things are still our responsibility. Once you take ownership of your mistakes, you become a stronger person. Do you understand?"

"I need to clean up the room?" Teddy guesses with a grumble.

"More than that," Draco says, lips twitching into a smile. "You need to believe and accept that it is your job to do so. Never make amends out of obligation to anyone else. Make them out of obligation to yourself."

"Own my mistakes," Teddy mutters, gaze scanning the room. "I can do that."

"Teddy," Draco says. "You can do anything."

He coaches the child on breaking a larger job into smaller ones. It's not advanced critical thinking, and Teddy accepts the challenge with alacrity. He takes up the scattered papers, and Draco concentrates on mending the broken crockery.

Potter does his bit to help when he thinks Draco isn't paying attention, but mostly he sits and watches them tidy up. He replies to questions and plays fetch with the crup, and his eyes follow Draco, not Teddy.

Unnerved by the scrutiny, Draco escapes as soon as the work is done.

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Luck is a fickle thing.

He's brought three sets of books to Potter, each promising in their own way, yet in the end, they yield nothing. Not even a hint of the answer. Draco is tempted to double check Potter's research—he's far too tired and weak to catch everything—but ultimately decides to trust him. He can't believe Potter would risk overlooking a cure.

Returning the books to the library is Draco's job. The task puts him in a foul mood; it's a sign of his failure. And the potential for success dwindles more each day. As extensive as the library is, only a few shelves have been given over to curses and cursebreaking, and Draco is close to exhausting those options.

Pince's locking spell, he discovered after the first night, folds under a basic Alohomora. He's juggling the stack of books, trying to brandish his wand at the library doors when Minerva arrives, gliding out of the dark like Snape. The woman really can move like a cat.

While Draco debates on how to greet her, she raises her wand and flicks it at the door. "Conscientia."

Draco watches the doors swing open, cringing inside at how the hinges creak and groan. Why not just announce their activities to everyone in the castle? Unaware of his thoughts, or more likely unbothered by them, Minerva waves him inside. "As caretaker, Mr Malfoy, you have permission to enter the library at any time."

He knows that. He's just never had the need before now. Nor does he want a record of his comings and goings, which use of the password will ensure. Visiting during the day has become impossible; the children watch him like a kettle of hawks. Why his activities garner so much interest, he'll never

understand, although the students' prying eyes are only a nuisance. Minerva's attention, on the other hand, is a problem. The witch is too clever by half.

He chooses a bland, noncommittal reply. "Thank you."

There. That should satisfy propriety. Draco shoulders past, rolling his eyes when Minerva tags along behind. Draco hugs the books to his chest as he makes his way to the Restricted Section. "Did you require my assistance, Professor?" he asks.

"No. Do you require mine?" she retorts, pitching her voice with a little too much innocence.

Are all witches this meddlesome? Or does he simply attract impertinence? The next time he encounters her in her cat form, he's stepping on her tail. Accidentally, of course.

"No, thank you," he says. "I'm doing fine on my own."

She clucks her tongue. "Well, if you insist."

"I do."

Her eyes stray to the books cradled in his arms. "I only ask because you seem to have taken up an interest in cursebreaking."

He's only interested in breaking one curse. The rest he couldn't care less about, frankly. He arches an eyebrow, the most neutral response he can manage.

"Albus kept a few books on curses," she says. "Perhaps you'd like a look at his collection?"

It occurs to him then that she knows. About Potter. About Teddy. She likely even knows about the stuffed crup. The game they're playing is as complex and convoluted as chess, but Draco doesn't have the time or desire to outmaneuver her. He lets the books slide from his arms. Setting them gently on the table, he nods. "I would, yes."

With a slow, sly smile, Minerva gestures him to follow.

The Headmaster's Tower will forever be Dumbledore's in Draco's mind. Much the same way it will always be Minerva's in the hearts of this generation. So the disconcertment that washes over him upon entering isn't surprising. Fawkes is absent, as is the carved glass bowl of sherbet lemons. He can't say the differences are glaring, but they still feel wrong, and he stifles the urge to move around, putting things in their proper places.

Minerva stands to the side, content to watch him grapple with old emotions, it seems. "The books are there." She points to a set of shelves across the room, notably separate from the towering library displayed behind her desk. "I'm afraid they're in no particular order."

Of course not. Draco frowns at the mess. That would have been lucky, and his luck is on an extended holiday. "I'll manage," he mutters.

"I'll just leave you then," she says and disappears back down the stairs.

An unexpected and welcome surprise. There's little question that she knows he's helping Potter, so why the intricate dance? Unless, perhaps, the dancers themselves aren't all known. In which case, the less that is revealed to questionable parties the better. And if Draco is considered anything by society at large, it's questionable. Leave it to the old cat to hedge her bets.

He begins with the parchment rolls that are stuffed between the books, inspecting and discarding as he goes. The silence soothes him, but it doesn't last for long.

"Ah! Mr Malfoy."

That voice. Draco freezes, elbow deep in the bookcase.

"Come to visit me at last?"

He could be ten years old again, for how small that voice makes him feel. "Professor McGonagall invited me," Draco says, turning to face Dumbledore's portrait.

"She invited you to make a mess of my bookcase?"

"Are you insinuating it's in some sort of order?" Draco ripostes.

The other portraits stir, roused by the conversation, and Draco begins to regret ever coming. An audience is the last thing he needs. Dumbledore throws a sherbet lemon into the air and catches it neatly on his tongue, then pats his beard flat over his bright purple robes. "Indeed it is. Which book do you require?"

No accusations. No sly looks. No reaction of any kind, as a matter of fact, and isn't that enough to make Draco break out in a sweat. It's a trap, he's positive. Were Potter faced with such a question, he could say, "Curses, sir. I need a book on obscure curses," and Dumbledore would laugh and compliment Potter on his obsession with keeping the world safe.

In the end, it doesn't matter how Draco answers. He could likely say, "Bunnies, sir. I need a book on cute, fluffy bunnies," and still find himself in Azkaban by dinnertime.

But Teddy is waiting for him, and Draco promised him a game of wizard's chess tonight. They're working on middlegame strategies, which the boy has shown a surprising aptitude for, so Draco shakes off the tatters of his childhood fears and asks, "Have you ever heard of a curse that steals a person's strength a little at a time, mimics a common chronic illness, and that responds, at least in part, to a transfer of

power spell?"

"No. But," Dumbledore adds when Draco closes his eyes, "if it exists, you'll find it in the thick, green book on the bottom shelf. Second from the left."

Draco glances over his shoulder. Five minutes ago he wouldn't have believed there was an order to the disarrangement of books and parchments, but there is a green book on the bottom shelf. And it's stacked second from the left.

"Happy hunting, Mr Malfoy." Dumbledore wiggles his fingers in a crude wave and digs another sweet out of his pocket. "Say hello to Harry for me, would you?"

Draco unearths the tome and slings it under his arm. Nothing about the old man surprises him anymore. "I will, sir."

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He keeps his knocks soft. Waking Teddy wouldn't be prudent. He grows weaker every day, despite Potter's bolstering magic. And he isn't the only one in decline. The very real possibility that Teddy won't survive has hit Potter these last few days, and while Draco doesn't believe he's given up, his hope is fading. He'll fight to the bitter end, giving his last breath so that Teddy has a few more precious seconds. He won't surrender. Then they'll both be dead and gone.

Draco knocks louder.

Potter finally comes, his slow, dejected shuffle recognizable even through the thick door. He lays his head against it with a thump. His voice is loud, but muffled. "What do you want, Draco?"

Draco takes his best guess as to where Potter has rested his head and crashes his fist against the wood. His rewards are a pained hiss and a vicious curse, and then Potter is throwing the door open and glaring.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I'm sick of you feeling sorry for yourself. He's not dead yet." It isn't exactly kind, but they don't have time for Potter's melodrama. He holds up the book he found in Minerva's office. "I might have something here."

There have been so many false trails, so many disappointments, that Draco's not surprised at Potter's lack of excitement. He does, however, swing the door wide and bids Draco enter. "Let's have a look," he says.

They take turns. The information doesn't seem to be in any order. In fact, Draco thinks the author was either a drunk or a sadist. The first ten pages are given over to curses that make you impotent, and their counter-curses—at least the man's priorities were clear—then follows with eighteen pages on 'Curses to use on your mother-in-law.'

He can't imagine this is the book they're looking for.

But two hours in, after Draco has played a game of chess with Teddy and sent him to bed, Potter spreads his hand over a page crowded with words and diagrams and says, "I think I found it."

"Really?" Draco lifts his head off the table. He'd only planned to rest his eyes, but his mouth is dry, and his vision is blurry. He blinks it clear to find Potter looking nauseated. "It's not good news, I take it," Draco says.

"There is a counter-curse, but—" Potter shuts his mouth abruptly.

Not good at all. Draco straightens his spine. "Let's hear the rest."

"The spell to break the curse is a variant of the transfer spell we've been using."

Not exactly the tragic news Draco was expecting.

Potter's throat bobs. "The incantation is a little different, and… to break the curse, the donor needs to be drained completely."

Draco's annoyance peaks. "Spit out the facts, Potter. The donor becomes a squib?" Potter's not far from that now. What magic he has left isn't enough to shed tears over, frankly.

"No," Potter says quietly. "The donor dies."

Oh. Scratch that book off the list. Draco reaches across the table and slams it shut. "I'll return it tomorrow and ask Dumbledore if he has any more suggestions."

Potter grabs a corner and they wrestle over it until Draco lets go, hissing under his breath. "You can't seriously be considering this."

"It's a cure," Potter insists. He rises and tucks the book onto a high shelf above the fireplace.

"It's nothing of the ki—"

Teddy begins to cough, then gasp, and that marks the end of the argument. Potter rushes into the bedroom, darting a warning glance at Draco as he goes. Draco rolls his eyes. It's tempting, he'll admit. He could take the book and be halfway to Dumbledore's office before Potter could even think about following, but what would that accomplish? Better to leave it here and turn Potter's attention to other

possible solutions.

Only one candle burns in the bedroom, but it's next to Teddy's bed. Draco sees Potter bend to take the boy in his arms. He moves stiffly, as if his body begrudges every inch. He bleeds weariness.

"Wait." There's more volume in Draco's command than he's planned, and both Potter and Teddy glance up in surprise. Draco doesn't wait on his good sense to catch up to his mouth. "Let me do it tonight."

"Do what?" Potter asks, annoyingly oblivious.

"The transfer spell," Draco says. "I'll give him my own strength."

"No," Potter says, voice plump with disapproval. "I won't allow it."

"You'd rather kill yourself instead?" If he could take the words back, he would, but it's too late. Teddy's right here, listening, but maybe that will be the straw that breaks Potter's back. "How much longer can you go on like this?" Draco pushes more quietly. "Teddy needs you alive. Just let me do it. It's one time." He intends for it to be more in the long run, but no sense fighting that battle now. "Let me," he cajoles.

Potter's weakening. His shoulders are set, true, but his mouth turns down on one side, and his eyes have lost the fire that blazed when Draco offered himself up for the job.

Potter doesn't want Draco hurt. The knowledge sets his heart beating faster.

"Just. This. Once." Potter's voice sounds like it's being dragged over nails, so Draco wisely celebrates his victory in silence. Why he feels as though he's won the Triwizard is anyone's guess; the spell isn't going to tickle. He unclasps his robes and lays them over the closest chair, then rolls up his shirtsleeves. Potter watches with sad eyes. "I didn't want to burden anyone."

"If you need help, then ask for it," Draco snaps. The irony of taking this side of the conversation isn't lost on him. Good thing Poppy isn't within hearing distance.

Teddy curls into a ball, crup in his hand and tears in his eyes. He's struggling to breathe. "I'm sorry," he wheezes. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

It will hurt. Draco won't cheapen the boy's feelings with lies. "If it helps you, then the discomfort will be well worth it," he says. Teddy shifts over on the bed, and Draco joins him. "Would you like to be asleep for the spell tonight?"

The question isn't for him, really, which Teddy must sense. He turns his tear-stained face to Potter. "Do I have to go to sleep?"

Strictly speaking, no. But the calmer the boy is, the better it will go for everyone. They've learned that by now. Potter catches Draco's eyes and nods. He circles to the other side of the bed, and they take their usual places. Only tonight Potter turns Teddy gently onto his other side to face Draco. "That might be for the best." He whispers the spell in the very same breath, and the boy is unconscious before uttering another protest.

"Hold him," Potter instructs.

Draco can't imagine that will be anything but awkward. Teddy is all arms and legs and messy hair. Breakable. Potter helps when Draco gets caught up in where to put elbows and knees. Somehow he knows how they fit together best.

Rather than telling Draco to relax or not to worry, Potter says, "Brace yourself." Draco has to respect him for that.

"Just do it, Potter."

A nostalgic smile flies across Potter's face, and he begins the incantation.

Draco senses nothing at first. He waits, but all he feels is Teddy's hair tickling his chin. What was all the fuss about? Then a spike of cold stabs him in the navel, and he flinches, shivers, but doesn't complain. It happens again, then again, the cold striking deeper each time, until Draco's teeth are chattering. He loses track of time, then his memory. Instinctively he tries to curl into a ball, but his body is weighed down with something, and he can't move. The cold becomes unbearable; his head pounds with it, his mind turning to fantasies of hot baths and a roaring fireplace. Of thick clothes and wool blankets. A moan passes his frozen lips.

"Hang on," he hears Potter say.

He clamps down on his tongue. Under no circumstances will he let Potter hear him beg.

"It's done. Draco? It's done."

It might be over, but Draco wants to die. He's never been so desperate for a spark of warmth. This is what Potter goes through nightly?

He feels blankets being piled on top of him, then someone is prying his arms from around his only source of heat. Draco growls, but the hands are insistent. "Ease up. You're hurting him."

The hands don't take Teddy away, and, in return, Draco concentrates on not crushing him. Freezing to death is one of the less painful ways to die, if he recalls, but the oblivion of sleep never comes. Each moment stretches until he can't remember how long he's been shivering on a thin mattress in the dungeons of Hogwarts. Years?

"Try to think of other things," Potter's voice says in his ear. "Good things. Warm things."

So Draco thinks of summer sunshine and how Potter's hand feels combing through his hair. Eventually,

he sleeps.

Go To Part ThreeThree

Not once, though all of this, has Draco let his responsibilities slide, although even he recognizes that he walks the edge of obsession in regards to his duties. Some tasks have fallen lower on the priority list, but he attends to everything in a timely manner.

Eighty percent of his job is walking the castle, so it's blind luck that he's in his office when the strange man stumbles in. Shoulder-length brown hair frames a round face and hazel eyes. He's of average stature, average weight, and average looks. Draco rolls his eyes.

"That's the blandest glamour I've ever seen, Potter."

The man straightens, taken aback. "Bland is excellent for avoiding notice."

Except that not noticing Potter would be like defying gravity. "As you say." Draco pushes another pile of confiscated magazines into his drawer, then locks it with his wand. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

The man—Potter—leans over his desk. "Teddy's missing."

Draco manages to hide his spike of fear. "The child wanders incessantly. I'm sure he'll turn up."

"He's been gone since breakfast, and I'm afraid—"

Potter's afraid? Draco's concern edges up the scale from curious to worried.

"—I'm afraid he's gone to the cliffs."

"What?" Draco barks.

"He wanted to see the snow dragons you told him about."

It takes Draco a few precious seconds to calculate how the recent rain and refreeze cycle may have affected the danger along the cliffs. No matter how he bends and twists the information, it comes out the same.

He's out of his chair and through the door in a heartbeat, Potter on his heels like a stuffed crup. Neither of them are wearing a coat or cloak, a misstep that slaps them in the face the moment they exit the castle. One vicious gust threatens to sweep Draco right off his feet. He breaks into a run, forgetting all about Potter until he skids to a stop at the end of the path. It's Potter who catches his arm before he goes down.

"Be more careful!" Potter shouts. "You're going to kill yourself."

Draco shakes him off. He might, depending on what they find. He does slow his pace, but not by much. The climb becomes more hazardous as they go, and they each slip more than once. In their favor, whole sections of earth are exposed where they weren't a few days ago, providing a bit more traction. Draco tries not to think of why they're bare, or of how the snow sheets looked breaking free and sliding over the drop, carrying everything in their path along with them.

They find Teddy exactly where Potter said they would. He's not looking at the dragons, though, at least he's not anymore. Bent backward at an odd angle, blood trickling from a cut on his forehead, he's unconscious. At first glance, he looks cut off at the knees, but a second look proves that impression

wrong.

It's much worse.

He's submerged thigh deep in the snowpack. This particular shelf of snow connects two boulders that stretch over the drop, and at the moment, the only thing keeping it in place is luck. The boy is pointed headfirst over the cliff, and one of his arms dangles in midair, fingers sticky with loose flakes. Thank Merlin he's dead to the world.

Not dead. That's a possibility Draco can't let himself consider.

Potter's cry of fear strikes a primal chord in Draco's own heart, but he doesn't let the panic take him so far that he allows Potter to get past him.

"Wait!" he says, catching the back of Potter's shirt. It's like trying to hold onto a tiger. "If you put your weight down wrong you're both dead!" He gives Potter a shake for good measure.

Potter vibrates under his touch, tense and ready to pounce.

"Think before you act, for once," Draco growls.

Now if only he can do the same. They approach as close as they dare, and then Draco reaches for his wand. "Accio Teddy," he says, singing the spell, sending it on its way with as much care as he can.

His magic lifts the boy a few inches and tugs him in Draco's direction. Clumps of ice break free, disappearing into the abyss, and the shelf slips a few inches. Potter twitches, but doesn't do anything stupid.

"Accio Teddy," Draco says again, infusing the spell with a little more power, and the boy slides free of the

snowpack by several more inches. It's not going to be enough. The shelf begins to fail, folding in on itself as it slips through the gap.

Draco pushes Potter back with all his might, using the leverage to launch himself forward, the spell flying from his lips one final time. "Accio Teddy!" The snow cascades over the cliff, and Teddy flies into Draco's arms.

He has no time to celebrate.

They land on a polished sheet of ice. Draco takes Teddy's weight, but the fall jars them both, and the boy makes a small sound of protest. He's alive. Too busy being relieved, Draco doesn't notice when they begin to slide. Even the soles of his winter boots can't find a grip on the smooth surface. They pick up speed as the angle of the slope increases.

He throws his free arm back, searching for a handhold, knowing he won't find one, but one finds him instead, and they jerk to a stop. Draco opens his eyes.

Potter is spread-eagle on the outcropping above. In one hand, he holds Teddy's coat. In the other, Draco's fingers. "Hang on," he grinds out.

Draco risks a glance down, regretting it immediately. They're only a few feet from going over. Potter is on rock, not ice, but how long can he hold the both of them? He doesn't have the strength to pull them up at the same time. Worse, Draco's wand is gone. Not in the lake, he hopes, not that it will matter if he falls. He's at Potter's mercy. Worse, so is Teddy.

Potter starts to lift Teddy, but the effort sends him slipping towards the edge of the rock. He tries again to the same result. He's more off the stone than on it, at this point. One more effort and they'll all die together.

"Let me go," Draco says.

Potter lifts his head, and Draco sees that he understands where things stand. Perhaps he even knew before Draco did.

"Let me go," Draco repeats. "You can't save us both."

Potter's eyes go wide, and his nostrils flare. "The hell I can't," he growls. He dips his head, takes two deep breaths, and then pulls, throwing himself backward with a mighty yell.

Unbelievably, it works. Draco's foot finds purchase on dry rock, and he's able to take his own weight. He unclenches his fingers from Potter's, Potter lets him go, and Draco watches Teddy slide up and over the top of the outcropping. A moment later, Potter's hand reappears. "Come on, Draco."

For too long, Draco stares at Potter's red, calloused fingers. The vertigo creeps back, but Potter doesn't give it a chance to take root. His face appears above, sporting a curious frown. "What are you waiting for?" He wiggles his fingers.

Draco takes his hand.

Teddy awakens long enough to gift them with a weak smile, then passes out again. Potter looks as pale as the snow. At some point, he dropped the glamour and is now too weak to bring it back. He shrugs after his third unsuccessful attempt. "We'll just have to be careful on the way back."

"Okay," Draco says. Then he punches Potter in the face.

Potter goes down with all the grace of a hippogriff. If Draco weren't so enraged, he'd laugh. Instead, he clenches his hands until his fingernails cut half-moons into his palms. "Why?" Draco asks, voice trembling. "Why didn't you let me go?"

Potter rubs his sore jaw and says nothing. When he offers Draco his wand, handle first, Draco takes it in silence.

The walk back feels endless, with Teddy slung over his shoulder, and Potter hanging on his free arm. "Stop," Potter says when they've reached the castle's shadow. "I need to—Teddy?" Potter shakes the boy gently, then with less care when he doesn't respond. Draco stays his hand when he tries to pull him away.

"You can barely walk yourself." Draco hefts the boy higher in his arms. "He's breathing. I can feel it. That's all the reassurance you're getting right now." He jerks away from Potter's clinging hand. "We need to get him back."

He needs to get them both back. He can't care for them properly here or in some cold, dark corridor in the bowels of the castle. The anger that exploded from him earlier still simmers below the surface. He stirs it just enough to keep it below a full boil. How dare Potter put Draco before Teddy? The sheer irresponsibility of the gesture makes him grind his teeth.

"Why?" he whispers, staring into the distance. "Why didn't you let me go?"

Potter's fingers return to his shoulder and dig in. "I couldn't."

You could have. You should have.

"We need to get out of sight before classes change," Draco says. His tone is biting, and there's little question that Potter senses it; he nods, mouth pressed into a thin, bloodless line. When Draco sets off again, Potter follows, but under his own power this time. Stubborn, reckless bastard.

They look like hobbled rabbits, Draco imagines, sneaking from shadow to shadow with Potter limping as fast as he can go and Draco stumbling under Teddy's weight. Still, they manage to slip into the castle unnoticed. At least Draco's luck hasn't abandoned him altogether.

As they pass into the dungeons, Teddy whimpers. "It hurts," he says against Draco's neck.

Undoubtedly. As fragile as the boy is, Draco wouldn't be surprised if he's broken a bone. Maybe several bones. The boy's whimpers grow louder, and, to distract them both, Draco begins to hum under his breath. Nothing he can put a name to, just some nameless lullaby haunting enough to have found a permanent home in his subconscious.

He walks and hums, his mind several minutes ahead. He's already back in Potter's rooms, mixing potions and chanting healing spells, but when Teddy starts to sing against his shoulder, he snaps back to the present. "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall," Teddy whispers, his words a perfect match for the tuneless melody. Draco's legs turn to water.

"And down will come baby, cradle and all," Teddy finishes.

"Never mind that," Draco says. "Let's sing a different one."

"Which one?" Teddy asks, breath hissing out of him like a deflating balloon.

Nothing comes to mind. Nothing.

"Draco!" he hears Potter call from somewhere far behind him. "What's wrong?"

What the fuck do you think is wrong? he wants to shout, but he's too short of breath from running... Why is he running? The message from his brain to his legs takes forever, but finally he slows, stops, and leans against the wall while he waits for Potter to catch up.

Teddy is limp on his shoulder, and Draco can't bring himself to call the child's name. What if he doesn't answer? His mind is clamoring—with Potter, with the curse, with the cure—but he shuts it all out. All he

wants is Teddy's soft breath on his neck. He'd give so much for that. Anything.

He hears Potter approach, his uneven gait distinct in the echoing passageway. How far behind did Draco leave him? Disoriented and fighting a pounding headache, he tries to get his bearings. He's deep into the castle, not far from his destination.

"What's wrong?" Potter wheezes as he materializes out of the dark. He sags against the wall next to Draco, then gives up and slides to the floor. He clutches Draco's robes. "Is he…?"

Is he?

"Shut up!" Draco growls. He closes his eyes, concentrates, waits, prays, and… there. A puff of air against his throat. He clutches the boy's jumper and turns his face into his hair. Teddy smells like damp earth and highland heather. And he's breathing.

"Draco?" Potter's voice breaks.

"He's alive." Even so, Draco still can't face Potter. He has a sick feeling the dampness on his cheeks isn't all melting snow, and one of them has to be strong. He slides his face along Teddy's skull, turning his face away from Potter's searching eyes. "Can you make it?"

"Don't worry about me."

Oh, that's rich.

"Fine, I won't." He focuses on Teddy instead. They reach their rooms a few minutes later, and Draco carries the boy straight to his bed. The worst of Teddy's injuries is a contusion that stretches from the left side of his stomach to his right shoulder, but it appears superficial. The large lump on his forehead is worrisome, but he rouses when shaken, and though he shies away from the bright light of Draco's wand,

his pupils contract as they should.

"I want my comics," he whines, and Draco finds no reason to disallow it. He sets them on the pillow, pulls the blankets to the boy's chin, and goes in search of Potter.

"He'll need a transfer tonight," Potter says when Draco slips out of the bedroom. Their little adventure has reopened the wound on his arm. Watching him try to rewrap the bandage doesn't give Draco the surge of vindictive pleasure he thought it would.

He doesn't question Potter's assertion about the transfer. There's no point.

He carries a chair around to Potter's side of the table and takes over, wiping away the blood and dirt to make way for the new bandages. The task is the same as before.

It's Draco who's different.

So vastly different that he doesn't fight the urge to stroke his fingers over the newly knitted skin, or balk when Potter twines their fingers together.

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The 'procedure'—that's how Draco refers to it—takes more out of Potter each time. This evening during the transfer, Draco is able to coax Teddy to sleep by reading to him from his new comic. It's better this way, they've found, because Teddy doesn't see how Potter falls apart afterward.

When it's over, Potter manages to slide away without waking the boy, but collapses before he can make it to his own bed. It speaks to his weakness that he doesn't protest when Draco hauls him off the floor and carries him the last few feet.

Tonight, Potter's shivering is so bad that the bed frame shakes along with him. Muttering a garbled thank you, he crawls across the mattress, then curls into a foetal position while Draco tucks the blankets around him.

The room is silent. Teddy rests peacefully, lulled into a deep sleep by Potter's magic. Potter suffers and shivers. Everything as per usual.

Draco can't leave.

His feet refuse to move him around the room to carry out the tasks that have become his. Capping potions. Straightening papers. Extinguishing the lights. Closing and warding the door. Instead, he stands by Potter's bed, shaking a bit himself.

After a few moments, Potter rouses himself enough to turn over and gaze at him. "Draco?" he rasps. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Everything.

"Are you positive?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Potter licks his lips. "I'm going to sleep now."

The quiet statement hits Draco like a Bludger. Potter won't sleep for hours. The bone-numbing cold won't let him. He won't be lulled into lethargy, then unconsciousness—those are the kindnesses of normal hypothermia. What he endures when he gives himself to Teddy is far worse. Doesn't he realize that Draco understands that? Knowing the answer is suddenly more important than breathing.

Potter doesn't give him a chance to ask. "Okay," he says again, voice shuddering. He turns back over. "G'night."

The urge to hit Potter is strong enough that Draco's hand tightens into a fist. He hates being lied to. He hates the little lies especially: the ones that Potter tells to make Draco feel better.

"Goodnight," he says, echoing Potter. Then he removes his robes.

Potter is so far gone that at first he doesn't register Draco's weight beside him. When he does, his head snaps around fast enough to make an audible thump on the pillow. Glassy-eyed, he watches Draco untangle the blankets from where they're wound into a knot and slip, fully clothed, beneath them.

"Draco," Potter says again. It isn't a question this time, thank Merlin, because what would Draco say in return? Certainly not I can't leave you. He thinks I won't leave you might be more acceptable—more like Draco's in control of his emotions— but that's not true either. In fact, it might be the biggest untruth of all.

Instead, he crawls under the blankets and molds himself to Potter's back, breathing into the cotton shirt that stretches between his shoulder blades. He can feel every knob of Potter's spine and how it gives against Draco's body stiffly, like a dry autumn leaf.

He can't say he cares for the comparison.

"What are you doing?" Potter asks, and Draco almost smiles at the awe in his voice.

"Getting you warm." Draco slides one hand beneath his own head and curls his other around Potter's chest. The cold is seeping into him now. He might as well be hugging a block of ice. He pulls the blankets to Potter's chin and wedges them tightly around him. "Better?"

When Potter doesn't reply, misgivings begin to surface. Draco bites his lip. What is he doing? What made him think this would help? Is Potter disgusted? The thought mortifies him enough that he jerks away.

Potter gasps. "No, please," he whispers, clutching Draco's arm, pulling him back. "You have no idea how good you feel. You have no idea. Please stay." His voice is stronger, Draco has to admit. And his shivering has abated some. Potter curls his own arm over Draco's, pinning it in place across his chest. "You're so warm."

So Draco stays, easing forward once more until they're touching head to toe. He rests his brow against Potter's hair, then watches his breath ruffle the locks at the base of Potter's neck. Each time it does, Potter shudders. The minutes pass, and the hand covering his grows warmer. Potter stops shivering. Despite his personal promise to stay alert, Draco feels his eyelids droop. They've made a snug cocoon inside the blankets, and it's almost too hot now, but Draco stays, hovering between wakefulness and sleep.

Potter's fingers begin to move.

His thumb is the first to wander, stroking slowly over Draco's knuckles, back and forth, stealing Draco's lassitude. By the time his other fingers join the party, Draco's sleepiness has vanished. Keeping his breathing even has become difficult, but he manages, even if it's the only task his brain seems capable of performing. Potter's fingers slide up and over Draco's wrist, teasing at his pulse point, before scratching playfully at the back of his hand.

There's enough heat between Draco's legs now that his thighs sting with it. Most of his body is weightless, on a different plane of existence—all except for his cock and the hand that Potter is making love to. Those are hypersensitive, alive with sensation.

There's no missing Draco's erection, not when they're this close, which is probably for the best. At least it's one less lie between them.

He's trembling as helplessly as Potter was a few minutes ago, which is insane. Except for Potter's gentle

exploration of Draco's hand, they haven't moved. Yet Draco feels like he's been on the edge for hours, his arousal bordering on painful. He curls his fingers into the soft material covering Potter's chest, then spreads them wide, feeling for a heartbeat.

It's right where it should be, tripping along rather quickly. Emboldened, Draco tips his head to nuzzle the nape of Potter's neck. As if his body is being carried along on a journey that his mind has no say in, his tongue darts out to wet a small patch of exposed skin.

The sound that Potter makes is halfway between a gasp and a groan. His hips jerk forward, then back, and Draco's mouth falls open on a silent cry, because the sudden warm pressure against his cock pushes him right to the brink.

And still neither one of them has given in to more than a breath of movement.

"Uncle Harry?"

The threat of orgasm recedes, but not far. Draco promises his entire Gringotts account to whatever higher power will keep the boy quiet for just one minute more.

"Uncle Harry?" Teddy's voice sounds small and frightened, but also thick with sleep. Small favors. The room is dark, but not black. If he sits up, he'll see them wrapped around each other.

"What is it, Teddy?" Potter replies, breathless enough that Draco has to bite down on the urge to laugh.

"I'm scared."

Me too, Draco adds silently. So scared.

"Don't be," Potter says, his voice so full of comfort and command that Draco feels his own fear recede.

"Everything is going to be fine. I'm going to take care of you. I promise."

Teddy is silent, perhaps already sleeping again.

"Draco," Potter says, whisper soft. "Draco?"

Draco doesn't answer. He can't, and eventually, unable to fight his exhaustion, Potter falls asleep.

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Draco vows to stay away for two days, a plan that fails before it even gets off the ground. He's back in their rooms by breakfast.

Teddy sees him first and steps on his crup in his haste to get to the door. The toy's yelp wakes Potter, who is once again asleep in his chair, although the table is empty of its usual mess of parchments. Draco stops in the doorway, presumably to hug Teddy, but the truth is he's so struck by Potter he can't move.

He looks no different than he did the evening before: scruffy, frowning, and unwashed. But the dejected curve of his back is absent, and his eyes are clear. It could mean good news, but Draco never lets the elation take hold. Potter flashes him a smile, and the goodbye is so blatant that it closes Draco's throat.

"I'm glad you're here early." Potter lays his hands on the table, and Draco sees that there is a stack of paper there, the topmost filled with neat, precise handwriting. "May I talk to you?"

Draco would rather have tea with Voldemort.

The parchment is the sort of heavy ivory stock that the Wizengamot uses. He's never known anything

positive to come from such documents.

"It's important," Potter continues, reading some of Draco's hesitation. "Teddy, could you please give us a few minutes alone?"

After a final hug to Draco's waist, Teddy obeys. The crup scampers out the door after him, and Draco closes it before Potter can even ask. Rather than join Potter at the table, he leans back against the wood, pressing his hands behind his back. He can sense the trap, even if he's uncertain of its nature.

The standoff lasts less than a minute, and then Potter pats the seat next to him. "Will you sit down?"

Although it's a reasonable request, Draco drags his feet. "Have you found something?" he asks as he sinks into the chair.

Potter has the nerve to look puzzled. "Oh! You mean about the curse?" He shakes his head. "No. I gave up looking actually. Several days ago."

The utter bastard. "Why?" Draco breathes the question.

Shrugging, Potter takes up a quill and taps it against the thick parchment. "We both know there's no other option."

Draco knows no such thing. There could be a dozen ways to circumvent the curse. A hundred. Of those, if even one holds the slightest chance that Potter's life can be spared, then it's worth searching until the very last. But one look at Potter's face tells him all he needs to know. The idiot is committed to his act of suicide.

The stack of paper grows more ominous by the second. Potter catches him looking and takes up the topmost page. "This is a guardianship contract. For Teddy. Several months ago, Andromeda granted me

sole guardianship."

"Why?"

"As my ward, Teddy became eligible for expedited medical care."

Potter's cheeks turn red, and Draco shakes his head, laughing bitterly under his breath. This embarrasses him? Potter's special treatment is hardly a secret. "That was a waste," he mutters.

"No. Not in the slightest," Potter disagrees. "Because now I can decide who will care for him in the event of my…."

"Death?" Draco stabs the word at him.

"I think that about covers it." Potter spins the paper around and sets in front of Draco. "I want you to be his guardian."

He'd laugh, only he thinks Potter might be serious. "No," he answers. And that's all he'll say on the matter.

"Draco—"

He lied. He has more to say. "Are you mad?" he roars. "Me? I can't be a guardian. I'm a pariah, Potter. One step away from a criminal in most people's eyes." He plays his ace, because if Potter is even remotely serious about this, dissuading him will be difficult. "My father might be responsible for this, you know." Giving vocalization to this terrible possibility is a thousand times worse than suspecting it in the quiet of his own heart, but if saying it will change Potter's mind, then so be it.

Potter taps his quill against his cheek. "I thought of that, but I honestly don't think he is."

There's no room for honesty in this equation, only truth. "You want to give me custody of a child who my own father may have tried to murder. You do realize this will make Christmas dinners rather tense." And possibly bloody. And… Draco shakes his head violently. "I can't be a—" He can't say it.

Potter cocks his head. "Yes, you can. You are already." He leans close. "He loves you."

Impossible.

"And that's not all we need to talk about," Potter has the gall to add, which as much says, 'You will do this. You will be a father to this child. Now, moving on.'

Draco totters on a precipice. He's been on the edge of so many things lately, balancing what he feels against what he shouldn't, that sooner of later he's going to fall. "There's more?" he croaks.

"I'm afraid that I may not have enough power left to break the curse. I want you to do it."

Oh, why not just ask for Draco to fly to the moon? That would be more reasonable. No. This he won't bend on. "I won't have a hand in your death. I refuse."

Potter's hands clench around the papers. "Please."

"I can't," Draco whispers. Just the thought and his stomach is threatening to rebel.

"For Teddy. I'm asking for Teddy."

He's asking for everything. He just doesn't realize it. Draco bends forward slowly, like heather under a heavy snow, and presses his palms against his eyes. Then he nods.

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Potter invites him to dinner, such as it is. Draco assures him there's no need to apologize for the watery soup and weak tea. He'd eat moldy bread, or even go hungry if necessary. He didn't want to leave, and now he doesn't need to invent excuses to stay.

They keep to their normal routine until Teddy is tucked into bed, sans transfer spell. "There's no reason for it tonight," Potter says. "He's fine for now, and by tomorrow it won't matter."

He looks poised to say something else, but Draco slaps a hand over his mouth. "Don't," he says. "I don't want to talk about it. Do we need to talk about it?"

Potter shakes his head. "I was just—"

"Making noise," Draco finishes for him. "And there's really no need."

"No," Potter agrees, taking Draco's hand and leading him to the bed. "Will you stay?" He follows Draco's eyes to the small lump Teddy makes beneath his blankets. "Just to sleep." He cringes. "I know it's selfish."

Knowing it doesn't matter, apparently, because he's slipping out of his clothes, leaving them in a puddle on the floor. His hands stray to the top button of Draco's shirt, but no farther. "Draco?"

"Yes," Draco says, wondering about the disconnect between his brain and body and where his heart fits into the loop, because he's curiously numb. Even the knowledge that he'll soon take Potter's life is

nothing but a cold lump in his chest.

Potter undresses him with more care than Draco has ever seen him take with anything, and he spent much of his young life watching Potter perform all manner of tasks, from the mundane to the miraculous. Each time Potter frees a button, he stops to take a breath, then reaches for the next one as he exhales. When those have been conquered, he tugs the shirt from Draco's shoulders. There's a sensual balance to their dance that swells but never boils over. Draco is hard, and so is Potter, yet when they climb into bed and press together, their hands find different homes.

Draco keeps one on Potter's heart and explores his face with the other. "You know I'm going to be a dreadful guardian."

Potter answers with a smile and a slight shake of his head. It maddens Draco that he seems so positive of his decision.

"I have no idea what to do," he presses, and finally Potter throws him a bone.

Palms cupping Draco's cheeks, he says, "Yes, you do. You've given him more guidance in two weeks than I've managed in two months. You understand his fears. You know his potential and his limitations. Your lessons are necessary and valuable. He loves you and respects you, and even more importantly, he trusts you. All of this, you've managed without a second thought." Potter swipes his thumbs under Draco's eyes. "You'll protect him. You'll keep him safe."

"I didn't keep you safe."

"That's not your job."

Perhaps not. But he would have taken it, had it been offered.

Potter's hands wander lower when Draco's do, and he nudges at Draco's cheek with his nose until their

lips are brushing. "This is so unfair to you."

Reality is unfair. It's hardly a revelation, so Draco lets dreams carry him forward this once. He accepts the kiss and responds only when he can't help himself, when Potter's tongue swipes along the edge of his top lip. What begins slowly ends in a frenzied rush.

There's no masking the sound of Draco's hand pumping Potter's cock, or the deep moans that rumble out of his chest at how Potter's fingers hold his own flesh a fraction too tightly. He comes first, and too fast, straining and shaking, whispering nonsense into Potter's shoulder. Potter gasps, then begins to buck his hips to match the rhythm of Draco's hand. His orgasm follows close behind, close enough that some of Draco's embarrassment lessens.

"Did you mean that?" Potter whispers, still trying to catch his breath.

Mean what? Confused, Draco doesn't answer, and Potter doesn't ask again.

They spoon together. Draco falls asleep with his face pressed to the back of Potter's neck, but he wakes up on his stomach, alone and shivering. On the other side of the bed, Potter lies sprawled on his back with Teddy tucked into the crook of his arm.

Draco watches them for a long time before slipping silently away.

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Draco tilts his head and studies the gargoyle. All these years, he thought the dreadful creature was growling at whatever poor fool found himself outside the headmaster's office. The joke's on them all—the damnable thing is laughing.

How such a small detail could change so much, he doesn't know. But it does. His courage abandons him. He doesn't mind the snarling, but he hates to be laughed at. He spins to leave and nearly crashes into Minerva.

Her smile is so very knowing that Draco's resolve snaps in half. What made him think he could do this?

"Mr Malfoy?"

"My apologies, Professor," Draco says, trying to step around her.

She slithers in front of him faster than an asp, the imagery so at odds with her character that Draco lets himself be stopped. "Do you need to see me?" she asks, coy as a schoolgirl.

He shakes his head.

"Do you want to see me?"

Draco despises people who fancy themselves clever. As if he would lose a game of semantics with a Gryffindor, even a venerable one. "Not anymore," he says smoothly.

"But you did."

Yes, he did. He wanted advice from a woman who calls herself his friend. He wanted to confide in the one person who'd given him a second chance. But now he sees how it could all backfire. What can Minerva add to the equation to tip the scales in their favor? She's simply one more cook destined to spoil the soup, throwing out suggestions and hypothesis and hopelessness that they've already considered, tested, and rejected.

She won't approve of Potter's plan, and she may even try to stop it. That is an eventuality Draco won't

allow.

"I did," he admits, voice rough.

She sees right through him. "But you've sorted it yourself, have you?"

He supposes he has. And all it took was one old Gryffindor and her laughing stone gargoyle. As epiphanies go, it lacks enough drama that one might even call it ordinary.

"Yes," he says. "All sorted."

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"So tell me," Draco says to Poppy over dinner that evening, "who can be a parent?"

"Anyone who can't keep their pants on," she replies, grinning.

Draco smiles in spite of himself. "I meant—" He shovels in a forkful of food to buy time. What had he meant? Leave it to Poppy to make a joke of the most serious question he's asked in years. "I meant, do you think anyone can be a good parent?"

"A good parent." She swirls her spoon through her soup. "Parenting comes from the heart, Draco. Not a textbook."

"Is that so?" A textbook he might have been able to manage. And that wasn't what he asked. "Even if the person's… experiences… in that regard haven't been the most upstanding? You still believe a hug can

conquer all?"

"Love conquers all."

Utter rubbish. "You really should leave the Hospital Wing once in a while."

His insult flies wide. In fact, Poppy laughs. "Oh, Draco. You do make it so easy sometimes."

Draco frowns at his plate.

"I don't believe a person's chances of being a good parent are doomed by how they themselves were parented." She belches into her napkin. "Happy?"

That depends. He risks a glance in her direction. "Are you being honest?" The question exposes his vulnerabilities, but it's imperative he knows.

She pats his hand, the gesture familiar and safe. "You'll make a wonderful father one day, Draco."

One day, maybe. Then again, maybe not.

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By mutual unspoken agreement, they don't tell Teddy. Draco suspects their silence will backfire, but those are consequences that have a place on the other side of this journey, and it's all he can do to focus on how to handle the first part.

Potter looks like a new person. Draco hates him for it. In Potter's mind, their success is at hand, but in Draco's, they've failed miserably. Nobody should be looking happy or relieved.

"You're late," Potter says when Draco arrives.

He didn't want to sit across from them all night and wait. It was bad enough to count down the minutes in the silence of his office. "I'm on time," he replies, feeling more dispassionate every second. Except when Potter tries to touch him. Then Draco's emotions take over. He slaps Potter's hand away and glowers.

And Potter, the bastard, seems to understand. He backs away. "He was waiting to say goodnight to you. I've already said… goodnight."

Very well. Draco pastes a smile on his face and goes to see Teddy. The boy is propped up in bed, reading a tattered comic book to his crup. He grins, and Draco's knees almost give out.

"You're here!" Teddy says.

"So I am."

"It's late, but Uncle Harry said I could wait up for you." He divests himself of his comics and blankets and throws his arms around Draco's neck. "Good night, Draco. See you in the morning."

"Yes," Draco says, face aching with his forced smile. "In the morning."

Then Potter is there, whispering something in Teddy's ear. The boy's eyes drift shut and he goes limp. Draco holds him close for a moment longer, ignoring Potter. He isn't up for a conversation on last minute details. Or on last minute anything, frankly.

"Are you ready?" Potter asks, attuned to Draco's mood. "You've memorized the incantation?"

It's an asinine question, but Draco lets it slide. "Of course."

"Good." Potter nods. "Good. Shall we get started?"

They're not starting anything. They're finishing everything. And Potter's making it all worse with his breezy nonchalance. "Shut up," Draco answers and sets Teddy back against the pillow.

Moving with perfect synchronicity, they lie down on the bed. Potter scoops the child into his arms and kisses his forehead, then closes his eyes and doesn't move for a long while. Draco waits, and finally Potter sighs, opens them and nods. "I'm ready."

They're both ready. Draco raises his wand, holds it against Potter's chest, and says, "Stupefy."

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The tragedy of childhood is that it never leaves us behind. If the foundations of a child's beliefs are flawed, he grows into a mere shadow of his potential. If his parents are cruel, he carries that cruelty inside of him, and it devours his soul one mouthful at a time. A boy's pain haunts the man he becomes.

But one time in a million, the man defeats the boy. He banishes the ghosts of his misdeeds and says farewell to the tenets he matured to. He adopts a different set of rules and learns to live by those instead.

Draco knows all of this is possible.

Because he said he'd never love again, but he was wrong.

~~*

It takes some doing to pry Teddy free. Potter's arms are stiff, a side-effect of the Stunner, but Draco works at it until he's separated them. The counter-curse calls for the donor's hand to rest over the victim's heart, which takes some additional manipulation. When they're all in their proper places—Teddy and Draco pressed together on one side of the bed and Potter alone on the other—Draco takes up his wand.

He hadn't planned to linger over this part. He's frightened, but not of the spell. Or of death.

This won't end Potter's troubles. Whoever hatched this plot will hatch another, and Potter will be weak this time around. Teddy will need a firm hand as he discovers the extent of his powers, and Potter folds to the boy's tantrums with nauseating ease. When it's all said and done, Draco's not convinced they'll be able to keep each other safe. This is the source of his fear.

Teddy's lax face is inches from his own. He's smiling in his sleep, and Draco knows he couldn't have asked for a more precious gift. "Good luck, cousin," he says, whispering into Teddy's hair. "Stay safe."

The incantation rolls off his tongue perfectly.

Potter stirs. Even weakened beyond repair, he has more magical fortitude then most. He'll be free of the spell as soon as Draco dies, fortunately. Teddy will need someone to care for him once the transfer is complete.

Draco finishes the chant and waits. The cold seeps in like tendrils of fog, not with the ice-pick-like efficiency of Potter's transfer spell. No pain, Draco thinks. What luck.

Then the agony takes him.

Theories abound as to the source of magic—whether it's tied to the brain, or the heart, or the soul—but now Draco knows the truth. Magic is in every cell of his body, and it's ripping him apart as it leaves.

Good luck, good luck, good luck, he calls, and—once—I love you, then the pain fades, and Draco dies.

At least he thinks he does.

He comes back to himself plagued with aches and pains, and he's cold. Not the numbing chill of the transfer spell, but cold nonetheless. White mist surrounds him on all sides, and there's no clear up or down; he's not even sure he's standing on anything solid. His stomach gives a sickening roll.

So this is the afterlife. Not exactly bustling, is it? As if in answer to this thought, a figure appears out of the mist, approaching with steady strides. Draco reminds himself that he's beyond harm and fear, but the thought brings no relief.

The mist peels back just as the figure reaches his side.

"Oh hell," Draco mutters.

Remus smiles, having a good look around as he does. "Not quite as fiery or dramatic, I'd say."

Draco scowls. "I'm not meant to be tethered to you for eternity, am I?" The insult lacks heat. Compared to some others Draco might have met here, Remus isn't all that bad a companion.

"Draco." Remus strokes his chin, coaxing a smile to life on his weathered face. "You're not dead yet."

Ah. "I'm just… changing stations, then?"

"If it pleases you to think of it that way. It's a stopping point, that's true enough. You haven't reached your final destination, if I may keep the analogy alive."

The man always did have a grim sense of humour. "You mean it gets worse?"

"Or better." Remus slings his hands into the pockets of his tattered cardigan. "I have so much I want to say to you. About Teddy. About Harry. But I expect you won't accept my gratitude with any measure of grace, so I'll keep some of it to myself."

"Just some?"

"Thank you," Remus says, unaffected by Draco's subtle sarcasm. "Thank you for taking care of them."

I wanted to.

Remus arches an eyebrow. I know. "Has Harry ever told you about his role in the Battle of Hogwarts?"

"In his own words?" Draco shakes his head. "We've been too busy to trade war stories."

"So you have." For a moment, a frown mars Remus' gentle face. "The short version, then. After Riddle's killing curse hit Harry, he came here."

"Riddle did?"

"Harry did."

"Potter died?"

"Inasmuch as you just did. Which is to say, no. He didn't." Remus leans close. "And neither have you yet."

There's always a 'yet'. Always a condition, or a promise, or a consequence. Even now. Even here. Draco can't help but feel ambivalent about that. "What do you mean?"

"Would you like to go back? You still have that choice." Remus raises a hand when an answer flies to Draco's tongue. "Consider carefully. Your life going forward won't be easy." He laughs at Draco's incredulous expression. "Shall I rephrase? It will be more difficult than you're used to."

"Why?"

"You have Harry and Teddy now. That won't be an easy relationship to explain. Have you thought about that?"

No, because he's still stuck on the first part of Remus' speech. "Have them? I don't have them."

Remus' eyes turn soft. "Oh yes, Draco. You most certainly do."

For several moments, Draco can't speak. "For how long?" he's finally able to ask, voice unsteady. He's not the bargaining sort, but even if it's just for a little while. A week. A day.

"Forever, I imagine," Remus answers.

He starts to say more, but Draco doesn't stay to listen. He's no stranger to conflict, and he's left too many things behind already. Once the decision takes hold in his heart, the mist dissipates, and the bright light dims. The return is a mad ride. Draco twists and turns, colliding with whatever crosses his path—memories, regrets, wishes, and promises—freefalling for miles, for years, and then he's back.

Home.

The first thing he hears is Teddy crying, and he lifts a hand toward the sound. His eyes don't want to open, but he pushes the issue, and eventually they cooperate. His fingers find Teddy's messy mop of hair just as his vision clears.

The boy is sprawled across Draco's chest and sobbing, so deep into his misery that he doesn't notice Draco's fingers drifting across his cheek. Potter, on the other hand, is silent, slumped in the chair by the bed with his head in his hands.

Draco reaches across the gulf and touches his knee. Potter's head jerks up. He looks even worse than usual, with red splotches all over his face and wet, bloodshot eyes.

"Hey," Draco rasps.

"Hey," Potter echoes, enough wonder in that one word to keep Draco happy forever.

He squeezes Potter's knee. "I'm back."

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The rising sun slants off Hogwarts' southern walls. From the foundation stones of Ravenclaw tower to

the far edge of the Slytherin dungeons, not a single flake of snow paints the cliff face. Minerva sees only bare rock. Radiant heat simmers from the castle, enough so that she feels like she's stepped into a warm oven. The snow dragons are gone.

Such a shame. She'd grown quite fond of them.

In their place grow rampant patches of wildflowers, sprouting from every crack or crevasse that holds even a teaspoon of soil.

Flowers in February. Laughing, Minerva uses her wand to pluck an armful of blooms, humming as they fly into her arms. She saves the heather for last, rimming her bouquet of primrose and thyme with a neat circle of the delicate white flowers, then turns to the wall and touches three fingers to her forehead.

"Well done, Mr Malfoy."

~ end *~*