

Into You

by Aislyn

Draco and Luna are paired in a Legilimency class and find that they have an unexpectedly strong connection to each other.

What She Saw

Chapter 1 of 17

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What She Saw

Legilimency is the art and ability of a witch or wizard to extract emotions and memories from another's mind, and Occlumency is the counter measure used to resist such magical intrusion and influence. Both are ancient skills and both have been added to Defense Against the Dark Arts training at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Students in the more advanced levels must study them just the same as they must brew liquid luck in Potions and turn a rabbit into a footstool in Transfiguration. These lessons are intended, in the precarious days since the return of You-Know-Who, to enable students to recognize when their mind is being invaded and to cultivate a defensive instinct to protect themselves.

The velvety voice of Severus Snape led his class of fifth and sixth years with slow and methodical instructions of the elusive art of potion-making. He droned on as if teaching the class were a terrible bore and an unappreciated inconvenience. "It is of the utmost importance that you maintain control of your thoughts if you are to succeed as a Legilimens. Judging by the parchments that I have been forced to grade this term, the lot of you won't be able to maintain a continuous thought for the time required to complete this exercise. However," he bellowed in a startling contrast to his previous volume. When he was certain he had unnerved the students sufficiently, he continued in the same low monotone. "I am required to teach it to you even knowing that most of you are far too dense to master the art and undoubtedly far too lacking in discipline to do anything with it at your current level of maturity. Professor Dumbledore dictates that it will be taught as a defensive measure, and as I am the most practiced in the art, I have the distinct pleasure," this word he drawled out slowly and with a sneer, as if the word itself tasted sour on his tongue, "of introducing you to it."

"Now then, to begin this exercise today you will make eye contact with the partner across from you. It is not necessary for a practiced Legilimens to face his subject or even to be in the same room, but for your first attempt eye contact will be critical. The person across from you is your partner for the duration of this term.

"Students seated facing the west wall of the classroom will now concentrate on an object; imagine it clearly to make it easier for your partner to ascertain. Envision an object that is distinct in your memory. This needs to be a real thing. Choose something you have seen often and can easily picture in your mind. This is meant to be a primary exercise, so the object should be simple; do not over complicate this. Doing so will undermine any chance your partner has of succeeding and will waste my time. Do not waste my time.

"Students opposite will attempt to read these thoughts; focus on your partners. Silence your own insipid thoughts, slow your breathing, and let everything else out of your mind. Focus wholly on your partner; try to see what they are seeing. You might feel a pressure, but do not be dissuaded; you must move past your subject's mental barrier."

Draco looked at Luna; she appeared as starry-eyed and flighty as always. She would never get into his mind. He was the son of a Death Eater; he'd been raised around people who were trained to keep secrets, people who lived duplicitous lives. His mouth curled up in a sneer and he leaned back in his chair, not as a challenge but as a dismissal. She would surely have no effect on him. This was a waste of his time. He pictured his father's desk. *"That should be simple enough for her,* he thought. *Not that*

she will succeed, he scoffed to himself. Draco watched Luna's eyes as they wandered to his. She took a big breath that set her ridiculous radish earrings swinging, and as she let it out he saw her pupils widen as she focused on him. He felt a gentle tingling, almost a tickling in his mind. He had the urge to giggle...to giggle? Draco Malfoy did not giggle. That could only mean she was reaching with her silly little mind into his. The sneer melted off his face and he shifted in his chair. *This can't be happening*, he thought in disbelief, and as the first signs of panic gripped him he instinctively shoved back with his mind, hard. Her eyes unfocused and she slumped in her chair as if he had just physically pushed her away.

Snape droned on obliviously, "Your subject will not invite you into their mind. It is not a dinner date, it is a survival tactic, and it may be the last one you have the chance to employ; it may be the one that makes the difference between your survival and your demise."

Luna's eyes closed, her breathing slowed, her shoulders straightened, her face relaxed; she took on the posture of a serene and stately woman rather than the daffy girl Draco found so easy to dismiss. As he puzzled over this for a fraction of a moment, her eyes opened in a flash, and he felt like he was pressed into the chair by a stampeding hippogriff.

He saw the desk. He was in the library at the Manor. He was standing in front of the desk in his father's office. He saw the shine of the heartwood the desk was made of. He knew it was heavy, far too heavy for even three men to lift without magical aid. He could smell the ink and parchment that lay strewn across the top. "What are you hiding from me, Draco?" he heard his father's voice ask lightly. His stomach fell when he heard the voice. This wasn't right. He was thinking of the desk. It was his object. He was just supposed to be thinking of a stupid object. He looked at the desk and now he could see his father sitting on the other side of it, eyeing him coolly. Draco felt the sweat breaking out on his upper lip and desperately hoped his father could not see it. His breathing went shallow and his voice sounded strangled to his own ears. "Nothing, Father, I have nothing to tell you."

The silence that stretched across the next few seconds felt like ten years in Draco's mind. He couldn't meet his father's eyes. Instead, his gaze roved nervously around the office. He glanced at the bookshelves behind his father's chair, populated with compendiums of Dark magic. He saw the pattern of dappled sunlight that fell through the windows on the west wall. He looked down at the carpet beneath him that was dark red like stained blood, and he felt hopeless.

"I know, Draco. I already know, and now I know that you are a disloyal..." his father's calm voice started rising... "deceitful..." he rose from his chair... "disappointing..." he was shouting now as he picked up his wand... "fool!" Lucius thundered the last and then, under his breath, muttered the curse which which Draco was all too familiar. "*Crucio*." And then there was white fire.

Draco sucked in a breath that was hot as an inferno. He knew what was coming. He knew his father would not stop. The fire grew jagged talons that ripped his flesh and scraped along his bones, melting them beneath the terrible heat and pressure. Soon his vision tilted as he collapsed under the pain, until all he could see were the legs of the desk as they crushed down the carpet with clawed reptilian feet. Draco knew that he would not be spared; that he would lose consciousness there, writhing on the blood-red carpet at his father's feet. Just as he knew that a scream would be torn from him, and that truth brought him unending shame. He knew he would feel shards of molten glass cut him apart and a ragged sound would be ripped from his throat.

Then, just at the crest of his inhale, he felt nothing but a bony hand on his shoulder and his eyes slammed back into his skull at a hundred miles an hour. He was reeling, panting, and looking up at stringy black hair and the worried gaze of the Dark Arts professor. "Malfoy," Snape drawled slowly, "are you unwell?" His lips turned up at the corners wryly but there was urgency in his gaze that belied his dismissive tone. Draco nodded; it was all he could manage to do as he collected his wits. Snape retreated like a snake uncoiling and disappeared from Draco's gaze, leaving him with nowhere else to look but at Luna again.

She had seen his shame, had delivered him directly to it. She had seen his cowardice. She, too, was breathing hard; her forehead and lip were beaded with sweat and her eyes were fervent, not glazed over in their usual state of dreamy oblivion. In the next moments neither could look away from the other; and together, as one, their breathing started to slow, their tensed muscles relaxed, and their concerned professor discreetly looked on with worry in his eyes.

It would be unexpected, to say the least, thought Snape, *for that dunderhead of a Ravenclaw to be a Legilimency prodigy*. He had considered that very thing when he had paired her with Draco, thinking she would lack the focus to be of any danger. It would be a desperate tragedy if she had in fact gone for a plunge into the mind of a Death Eater's son and found something she oughtn't to have seen. He had only himself to blame for partnering them with each other. But then, how could he have ever known she would be acute with a mental talent when her own mind was so lost in fantasy? "Class dismissed," Snape growled, his eyes never leaving Draco's pale and clammy face.

The next morning at breakfast Severus mused to himself that perhaps this was for the best. He peered thoughtfully at Luna Lovegood as she gazed sightlessly into space, her meal momentarily forgotten. She would offer testimony that was as far from credible as he could imagine. The only one who might give her an ear would be the Potter prat, but even he knew she was a bit out of sorts. Even if she had seen anything, and there wouldn't likely be anything in young Draco's mind of any crucial importance to the Dark Lord, she would likely think little of it and dismiss it to return to her daydreaming.

After all, he assured himself, her support of Potter and his friends in Dumbledore's Army was based on camaraderie. She was simply following the Golden Trio since they had seemed to befriend her; she knew nothing of what was playing out around her. Surely she had just bumbled into harm's way. Snape pondered Luna's prospects in life. Her bloodlines were impeccable; she was a pureblood, but her father was an unmitigated fool. He was also spineless as a jellyfish. It was a trait which his daughter had seemingly not inherited, to her credit.

No, he decided, putting his mind at rest, he needn't worry about Luna and Draco. The Legilimency lessons would continue unchanged. There would be undue questions if he were to interfere with the partnering, and besides, Draco would surely tell him if there was any cause for concern.

The matter decided, he turned his attention to his own breakfast. Those damnable house-elves couldn't manage to produce toast that wasn't overdone on one side. It was appalling. He'd do well to fix his own meals in his quarters, but Dumbledore insisted he be present at meals in the Great Hall, serving in the capacity of a chaperone, he supposed. Or perhaps it was a misguided attempt to encourage Snape to socialize with the rest of the staff. Dumbledore would do well to leave his personal habits as just that, personal, and keep his meddling to himself. The thought had Snape glancing towards Albus Dumbledore as if guilty of maligning him, if even just in his own thoughts. Dumbledore met his gaze with a smile and a twinkle in his eye, giving a wave with a half-eaten slice of toast in his hand. That was one mind Severus wanted never to see into. He never wanted to know how much the man actually knew; he seemed to be nearly omniscient. What a heavy burden that must be.

Better Left Unsaid

Chapter 2 of 17

Draco and Luna are paired in a Legilimency class and find that they have an unexpectedly strong connection to each other.

Draco Malfoy had spent a sleepless night tormented by his most hated memory and the new shame of having it witnessed by a blithering idiot of a Ravenclaw. Damn her! Was this some kind of a trick? Was it a test of the Dark Lord's? Was it a cruel joke of fate? Had she seen the whole memory? Had she felt the pain he relived just as humiliatingly as the first time he had lived through it? He had so many questions, but he would be in her debt if he revealed to her that he did not know the answers. He hated feeling vulnerable to anyone. And now he was at the mercy of a slip of a girl who had just happened upon the memory of the very moment when he was most helpless.

After class he had swept from the room as quickly as possible and stood shaking in a deserted boys' bathroom. As his breathing slowed and his mind stopped reeling, he looked up into the mirror. While his face may have been a little paler than usual, his neat platinum hair had not a strand out of place. He glared into his own icy blue eyes, the eyes Luna had just been staring through into his innermost thoughts. His outward appearance gave little to no indication that his mind had just been violated. Or that he had just relived a nightmare. He still felt the perspiration beading on his forehead and staining the underarms of his shirt. Damn her if he wasn't starting to feel the same way now, just thinking about, it even days later as he lay in the safety of his own bed. He was starting to feel clammy and his stomach was roiling.

He decided he wouldn't tell Snape what Luna might have seen, figuring that the fewer people who knew of his shame, the better. He was relatively certain she wouldn't have told anyone about the memory. She might not even have seen it, he consoled himself. Just because he relived the memory in his head didn't mean she was a party to it. Hell, she could've been daydreaming about unicorns dancing in tutus for all he knew. He snorted at the thought.

He had toyed with the idea of threatening her into keeping her silence, but threats could have unpredictable results. He considered trying to convince her it was a nightmare or a false vision, but that, too, could lead to a slippery slope. He didn't want to draw undue attention to how important the memory was to him; that would be showing his hand. No, he was going to use his Slytherin cunning to control this situation. For the most effective damage control he would need as much information as he could gather about his prey. He had to study Luna Lovegood. He was going to find out everything about her. He had been certain at first that she could be of no consequence to him, but now she was a liability. He would have to find out just what was in her head. If, he corrected himself, if there was anything in her head. He didn't know which possibility he feared more: that she might be a harmless dunderhead, in which case learning more about her would be maddening, or that she might have everyone fooled and be an adversary of whom he must be wary.

Luna meandered down the corridor in the general direction of her next class. No one spoke to her. It was not done as an outright insult; it was just that no one really noticed her as she walked by. Her gaze was directed up towards the ceiling and she was imagining birds flying above her and thinking how pretty the birds were that she had seen when she and her father had gone hiking that summer. She would have to find a charm to make birds fly about. Maybe she could Transfigure some. She'd have to ask Professor McGonagall after her next Transfiguration class. She heaved a bit of a sigh as she thought what a shame it was to be inside on this day. It was one of the last days before winter truly set in and made it necessary to bundle up in layers of clothing to go outdoors. It was too late in the season to see many birds but she might be able to see a few remaining geese heading south, especially if she went down by the lake. The air would be crisp and flush her skin when she walked outside, but it would be warm enough in the sun. She resolved to walk down by the lake after her classes were through for the day. She was anxious to be out of doors. But she still had Defense Against the Dark Arts with the formidable Professor Snape. The reminder of her next class sobered her. She was about to go practice Legilimency with Draco Malfoy.

The week before had been startling. She had never before had such an intimate experience in any capacity in her life. She had felt like an intruder as she had watched Draco in that library. It was as if she was right there next to him, but she knew she was there as a witness to a memory and was seeing something that had already come to pass. She could see Draco and the room he was standing in. He looked no younger than he was now, she mused, so it must've been a recent memory. She could see his father on the other side of a formidable desk scattered with quills and parchments and crumpled newspaper. She thought she saw a *Quibbler* partially tucked under some scrolls. That was interesting, that Lucius Malfoy read her own father's newspaper.

And then she could feel Draco breathing as if her own chest were heaving anxiously. She could feel what Draco felt. He was terrified. Watching him from the outside, no one would know the depth of emotion or the speed of thought coursing through Draco Malfoy. He had practiced long and hard to hide his emotions. He was considering what he should say in answer to his father's questioning, wondering if the infamous Malfoy dungeons would be a fate preferable to facing this man that he loathed and feared, especially knowing he *had* disobeyed his father's express orders. But Luna knew that even though Draco accepted that he was guilty of disobeying, he was not sorry for what he had done.

She had never imagined anyone using an Unforgiveable Curse on their own child. It was, well, unforgiveable. But Draco hadn't been surprised in the memory when his father cursed him. He had braced himself, but not for an unknown experience. He had prepared himself for what he knew was coming. He had been through it before. Draco Malfoy had lived through the Cruciatus Curse before. Just when she was starting to get lost considering the possibility of that, all of her thoughts suddenly emptied out of her head and she was paralyzed by his pain.

They were in agony together. She felt Draco's heart start to race, and her own beat to echo it. His body was burning from the inside like his bones were made out of lava and they couldn't support him any more. It was melting her bones, too. She went from seeing him and being on the outside to being witness inside him. They collapsed together. Their body was burning hotter and deeper, and they couldn't take much more. How could they stand this? How could they survive it? It was tearing at them, clawing through their body, but Draco's mind was still able to think through the pain. She reached out frantically for his thoughts. He was calm, he was reasonable even though she knew how much he was hurting. He knew there would be an end soon. Either he would pass out from the pain and wake up later or he would pass out and not wake up ever again, and either was fine with him. And when he resolved this for himself, deciding their fate without hysterics, he bolstered her faith that it was possible to ride out this pain calmly. They could do this together.

Then she felt another creeping emotion. Draco was thinking about his shame. He was ashamed. His will was so strong that he was carrying them both through this unholy curse, but he was ashamed of himself for what he perceived as his weakness because he felt his body start to betray him. He knew with certainty that he was about to cry out and could not forgive himself for giving his father that satisfaction. Draco had promised himself he wouldn't make a noise. That he would remain stoic and silent through it all. It was a point of pride. And he was about to fail.

And through all this they burned together. Their lungs gathered in the burning, flaming air that they would use to let out the traitorous scream, and just when their heart broke at their failure and the scream started to burn in their chest and move up towards their raw and tortured throat, an icy hand was painfully squeezing their shoulder.

And then Draco was gone. She was alone in her own head, and she was reeling. Her eyes could only see burning spots, as if she had been staring at the sun. Her chest heaved, and her throat was raw. She raised her eyes to look at Draco and he was staring back at her. She faced the tumultuous blue eyes she had just been on the other side of, and she was speechless. She was a gentle soul. She was brave, but naïve perhaps, and she was dumbfounded by what she had just seen and felt. She was amazed by Draco, who had always appeared shallow and spiteful but who she now knew was a brave and tortured young man. She had been dragged through hell with him just now. It was unreal. She had never in her life felt she knew anyone more intimately than she now knew Draco Malfoy.

Draco strode towards the dungeon classroom where Professor Snape would continue with his Legilimency lessons. Best to just face the situation so he could determine how to proceed. His robes billowed out behind him as he made his way through the halls. His jaw was clenched and the menacing look on his face had even fourth and fifth years clearing out of his way. He knew he had that effect on people, and he accepted it. Sometimes he even enjoyed it. He breezed down the corridors as if he had the run of the place, which he did, paying little regard to his surroundings. He was preoccupied with what was to come from this next class and didn't notice the small frame of a slow-moving girl in his path who he was about to plow into. At the very last second he tried to stop, but his body was already in motion. He stepped wide around her but couldn't make it far enough to the side to keep from knocking into her arm and making her spill her books all over the floor. He rolled his eyes; didn't this kid know to stay out of the way when a Malfoy was heading through?

He looked over at the offending child to find that what he had thought was a younger student was actually the tiny frame of Luna Lovegood. Perfect. This was a great way to start out, by bowling Luna over in the corridor before class had even begun. She was still standing there frozen in place, looking down at her books as if confused as to why they were on the floor instead of cradled in her arms. It took a moment for her to come back to her senses from whatever daydream had preoccupied her, but by that time Draco had folded his tall frame over and with a disgusted sigh picked the books up from the floor.

"Having trouble getting to class again, Lovegood?" he asked with a haughty smirk. "Don't worry, you can follow me and maybe you won't get lost." With that he turned and continued sweeping down the corridor, still carrying Luna's books with his own. It wouldn't do for him to treat her too differently than he normally would have. That would

make him appear intimidated by their experience, by her. A Malfoy was not easily cowed. It was just that now he would notice her. How else could he learn about her? And, he grudgingly admitted to himself, after what they had been through together, she deserved to be noticed by him now.

Luna watched Draco Malfoy's back as he walked away. Was he carrying her books for her? Merlin's billy goat, would wonders never cease? Maybe he, too, felt they'd shared something intimate. But surely he wouldn't want to be reminded of it. Luna knew that with men especially it was oftentimes better to leave things unsaid. So she wouldn't say anything. It wasn't her place to say anything, anyway. She would accept this favor of him carrying her books, and she would not read anything into it. She would act as if this was any other class; that would be the best way to respect Draco and his privacy after what they had shared. At least she hoped so.

When she got to her desk her books were already sitting there. She took her seat and waited for Professor Snape to address the class and start them on their exercise for the day. She hoped it would not be as trying an experience as the last one. Malfoy now seemed to be purposely ignoring her. He was leaning back and sprawling in his chair with his long legs stretched out into the aisle. He turned to his right to say something to Blaise, and she saw Draco's profile. His really was quite striking. She had seen his face plenty of times before, but she had never thought to evaluate whether he was good looking or not. She had never really thought too much about him, or of him, before now. But now that she had seen inside his character even a little bit, had seen his humanity and his humility, it was as if he had suddenly come alive to her in her mind. He was a real person now. Not just a bully or the son of a Death Eater but a real person. He was Draco Malfoy. And according to Professor Snape, Draco Malfoy was about to invade her mind the same way she had invaded his. She wondered what memory he would find his way into. After all, she was certain he hadn't intended her to see what she had, so she might have no control over what he saw in her mind, either. She hoped it was a memory she could live with sharing.

Daymares and Dance Steps

Chapter 3 of 17

Draco gets his chance to find out more about Luna.

"Since most of you were entirely unsuccessful during our first attempt at Legilimency," Professor Snape drawled with contempt, "this time we will make things even simpler. Water. Think about water. A fishbowl, a glass of water, a waterfall, it matters not, but think about water. That way your partners will have a starting point to focus on. Concentrate. Put everything else out of your mind. Don't think about what you are doing...just do it. Look at your partner and reach inside his or her mind and find the water."

Water, Draco thought. *That should be easy enough. Look for water* He latched his eyes onto Luna's and found himself contemplating their color. He had never, not even yesterday, noticed their color before. They were blue. Blue like water. He tried to remember how it had started yesterday, when their minds met. He had felt a tickling and then she was just there. But how was he to do that? How did he get out of his own head and into hers? This couldn't be a one-way street, could it? Was he was vulnerable to her but she impervious to him? That couldn't be . . . could it? Just when he was starting to feel the beginnings of hysteria he felt it again, that tickling. But it was in his head. That wasn't him reaching out to her; she was reaching out to him again. This time it didn't feel like an assault. It wasn't brutal like when she had slammed into his mind before, when she'd forced her way into his memory. This was like ringing a doorbell. It was a polite introduction between minds. It was an invitation. She was looking at him with a peaceful face but he was unsure what to do next. How did he respond? He looked at Luna, took a breath, and started thinking to himself, *Water, water, water*. In his mind the tickling sensation turned into sprinkles of water showering. His pupils dilated and he was no longer seeing with his eyes.

Luna was so at peace and so happy. She was feeling fat water drops as they splashed onto her upturned face. It was glorious. She hadn't a care in the world for that moment. Her bare feet were splashing in ankle-deep puddles and she was humming to herself. For no particular reason she began to hum a slow song and to wait along with it, holding her arms out in proper form to embrace her invisible partner. It was the song Daddy had played on the old Victrola when he had first taught her how to dance, and she knew it well. She could almost hear the instruments playing along in the back of her mind as she swept across the yard in the squishy, muddy grass. Her damp hair hung heavy down her back and whipped her with sodden clumps when she made sudden turns. She moved with natural grace but also with a practiced air that spoke of many dance lessons since that first one. She held her neck straight and moved in easy, sweeping motions practiced to compliment her dance partner's movements. Her eyes closed, but still she was moving across the yard in her delicate dance steps.

Eventually she ran out of song to hum and came to a stop. Smiling, she bowed a deep formal curtsy to her imaginary partner, her eyes cast demurely toward the ground, and sighed. When she looked up she saw that she was behind the house and her traitorous eyes turned to face the back garden. Daddy had stopped planting there years ago. He hadn't had the heart after her mother had died in that very field. Luna's throat swelled suddenly as she stared at the plot of land that had grown wild into a patch of knee-high grass. She had been there the morning her mother had died. Mum had warned her to stand back but said Luna could watch her work with the new charm she was going to try. Luna had been just a child then, watching intently so that she could be a great witch like her mother one day. She wanted to be just like her invincible Mother who loved her and Daddy so much.

In a fraction of a moment Luna saw a flash and thought how pretty it was. Maybe her mother would teach her to make that light. But then as her eyes searched through the brightness to see if her mother was pleased with her new spell, Luna saw her crumpled form fallen in the garden. Her mother did not move. Luna didn't know what she was seeing at first, and when she did recognize what she saw she didn't know what to do. She just stood there locked in place. That was how her father had found her; she didn't know how much later that she had been standing rigidly, staring unblinkingly at her mother's body. All thought and command of speech had left her. She was just there. And her mother's body was all she could see. And she couldn't do anything about it.

She stared now at the bare field that held such a terrible memory; she was drenched from the rain she had just been dancing in and her heart was aching. Her body shivered against her will. The rain that had moments ago been refreshing to her was now sinister and mocking. She felt the weight pressing down on her again, crushing her into the muddy ground, reminding her that she was still the same helpless girl who hadn't known what to do. She couldn't reach her mother that day, she hadn't known how. And her father, even as much as he loved Luna, had withdrawn since losing his wife. He and Luna were still close, but she knew she would never truly reach him again. She was cut off, alone, and she cursed herself for being so helpless. A fat raindrop hit her squarely on the nose then and startled her out of her macabre musings. The summer rain was still falling. And then the garden was gone. There were just falling raindrops. Falling water drops. Just water.

Luna was aware again of her classroom at Hogwarts, but the water was still there. It was filling her eyes as she looked at Draco. She didn't always cry when she thought about her mother. In fact, more and more she was able to control her reaction, schooling herself so she didn't show this sign of vulnerability around others. She didn't want to give anyone an idea of what her weak spots were, so they couldn't use them to torment her. Whatever others did to mock her, she acted as though it didn't bother her in the least. That took the power away from them and took the fun out of their teasing. Truth be told, most of the time she really didn't care what other people thought.

But now Draco was looking at her; Draco Malfoy, the school bully who spent a great portion of his time ridiculing other students, had just seen her most painful thoughts. She didn't have to let him know that, though. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a breath and the tears spilled silently out of her eyes, but she smiled a wistful, dreamy smile and said in her usual gentle voice, "You did great, Draco." Draco, however, was looking at her gobstruck. He really looked confused and ill at ease. If she hadn't been so out of sorts she probably would have been amused by his expression. Once he sorted himself out he would probably be disgusted at her show of weakness, especially since he himself was so driven to be master of his own feelings. If he hated himself for crying out in pain, he was sure to be put off by her sobbing like a simpering little girl who'd got lost at the market.

Well, no matter; she wasn't crying. She wouldn't cry. She nonchalantly raised her hands up to fiddle with her hair and in the process brushed the sleeves of her robes across her face to hide the tracks of her tears. When she lowered her arms again she looked down at her books, hoping the class would let out soon. She didn't want to see if Draco's startled expression had changed into the sneering look of disgust he so often wore. She simply was not in the mood to contend with a pompous Malfoy just now. Thankfully it was only moments later that Professor Snape dismissed the class. She risked a glance towards Draco as she rose weakly from her seat, but he was already walking away with Blaise.

As she followed them from the room she heard Blaise say, "That was utterly boring, mate. I concentrated so hard I gave myself a headache, and when I finally sorted it all out Pansy was thinking of a bleeding swan pond! What a waste, eh? Ah, but you were stuck with Looney Lovegood, right? Tell us, old man, what was she thinking of? Some deep-sea creature no one's ever heard of that steals knickers?"

Luna's heart started beating double time. *Come on, Draco*, she thought, *give me a reason to believe in you* It was an odd thought, since she should've only been thinking about maintaining her privacy. Why was she hoping she could believe in Draco Malfoy? But she did hope he would be a kind custodian of her vulnerability.

Just then Ginny rushed up to her, flushed with excitement. She started to rattle on excitedly about the weekend trip to Hogsmeade and Luna couldn't make out what Draco was saying. She thought she heard the word "rain", and that was all she could catch. Her heart went from double time to a hunk of lead that dropped to the floor. Well, that was her relative anonymity circling the drain. By this time tomorrow she would be poor pathetic Loony who went cuckoo after she lost her mum. She would survive this just like she had years ago when she'd had to find a way to keep going without her mother, only now she would have to find a way to keep on without her dignity. At least she would still have her daydreams to content her.

Well, that was it; his worries were over, Draco thought to himself. The danger had passed. He now had something on Luna as collateral for his secret. Surely she wouldn't dare betray the involuntary confidence they had shared when he now knew about her moment of helplessness and self-recrimination. He thought of her standing there in that field as a child, not knowing what to do. Her mother should never have allowed Luna to be around if she was practicing something volatile like that, he thought. She'd put her daughter in a position to watch her die, and she could've easily hurt Luna as well when casting her misguided charm. In fact she had hurt Luna, in the worst possible way. It was her mother who had died, but the life had just gone out of Luna like an enchantment had just worn off. Her mind had started out so peacefully in the beginning when she had been dancing in the rain. He had envied her then for her simple life. She had it easy. He father wasn't a raging lunatic. He was a fool, judging by what Lucius Malfoy had to say about him, but he wasn't cruel. Luna wasn't going to grow into a hated Death Eater. She wasn't always being watched over and groomed to be meticulous and merciless. She was free as a peasant to spend her days frivolously prancing about a muddy yard, so he had concluded disdainfully that she was as empty-headed as he had always presumed her to be. Just when he had passed this judgment on her she'd stopped dancing. What she showed him next took him by surprise.

The delight she had felt from the rain was an easy feeling. The adoration she had for her mother was warm and enveloping and absolute. But the complexity of her grief was overwhelming. Luna's shock at seeing her fallen mother was wrenching. She would have been less alarmed if the sun had suddenly fallen from the sky. When Draco felt the weight of the situation dawn on her child mind, he felt that he too would stand motionless until he grew into the ground. Those horrific moments stretched on infinitely, and they brewed a caustic poison of agony that threatened to choke Luna when she saw that miserable field. It was a familiar hollowness to her he somehow knew. He was surprised to find that she was not empty in her head. Luna was . . . Luna was . . . he didn't know what the hell Luna was. There was more to her than she showed. But she was not a threat to him. He wouldn't have to learn everything about her in an effort to protect his secret.

He found himself disappointed by this thought. He actually wanted to get to know more about her. He laughed at himself for the very idea. But she was a mystery to him. She'd shown him more depth of emotion and honesty than he had ever seen from any other girl. The girls in his House were coquettish and calculating. Even his own mother had long ago learned to school her emotions and choose her words carefully, and he knew those carefully chosen words omitted a multitude of sins. But he supposed if he were to be absolutely thorough it wouldn't hurt to learn more about the girl. He probably ought to study her a bit more. After all, she might panic now that he had her memory and blurt out his secret as a pre-emptive attack. He felt much better as he decided that he did indeed have cause to get to know Luna better. *Just to be on the safe side*, he told himself.

Autumn Bluebirds

Chapter 4 of 17

The fates align to offer Draco a perfect opportunity.

Transfiguration class had passed by in a haze for Luna. It was usually one of her favorite classes, but she couldn't stop thinking about Draco. What did he really think about what he'd seen in her mind? She wished now that she hadn't been a coward and avoided looking at him, so she could have watched his face and been sure. She had thought seeing his disgust would be the worst thing, but now she realized the worst thing was that she would never know if his face had held disgust at all, or ... Or what? What had she wanted to see on his face? Not pity, that was for sure. Not compassion; she did not expect empathy from Draco. Maybe just acknowledgement. Maybe she hoped for affirmation of the moment in her life when she had felt the most alone in this world. It was the moment when she had first seen death and realized everything does not stay the same, as much as we might wish it would. She hoped that he could just be in that memory and not judge her. She hoped he could just be there in solidarity with her since he, too, knew what pain was.

He couldn't help it any more than she could have. He couldn't change what happened. But when she had been in his memory she'd felt his courage. He had a strong mind. She hoped that since she had shared her memory with him, he could just have it inside his head now, too, and he would be the other person who held that memory now. Maybe now she wouldn't be stuck there alone over and over, every time she was drawn back to that vision. Ah, but maybe all this was just another of her fanciful thoughts, a sad daydream that was very unlikely. And it was a sad daydream that got her in trouble with Professor McGonagall.

"Miss Lovegood," she heard the Professor say. "Might I suggest that the next time you are in my class you attempt to participate in the lesson? I will be forced to give you zero credit for the practice exercise for today." Startled, Luna looked around her. In front of her was a footstool and on every other desk, all of them long since abandoned by the students, there was a turtle. "Oh, Professor, I'm sorry," Luna said softly. "I'm really very sorry."

"Luna," Professor McGonagall said in a gentler voice, "I could see in your eyes today that you were flustered and upset. I am here if you want to talk to me. But I still must hold you accountable to an academic standard. It's for your own benefit, dear. Please try to bring your best effort to our next class. You are one of my most talented students in Transfiguration."

"Thank you, Professor," Luna answered morosely. "I'm sorry I disappointed you. I'll try very carefully not to do it again."

"There's a girl, Luna," said Professor McGonagall with a gentle smile. "Is there anything you want to talk to me about?"

"No, ma'am. But thank you." Professor McGonagall gave a small nod and turned away. Then Luna spoke again and she turned back to face the girl. "Actually, I had a question about bluebirds."

The following week Legilimency lessons were academic rather than practical, to provide students ample time to complete the extensive and detailed writing assignment Professor Snape had assigned about wizarding laws regarding the appropriate use of Legilimency. Snape had lectured for nearly the complete class period, the whole time keeping on as if quite put out to have to be there at all. He had begun on his diatribe as soon as they were seated and concluded the class by describing the offending assignment which would be due in one month's time, abruptly announcing that the class was dismissed, and storming out the door.

Luna had been taking notes so furiously that she hadn't had the chance she'd hoped for to talk to Draco or even look at him. If she were to be honest, she wouldn't be able to think of a single thing to say until she saw the way he looked at her. If he looked at her like she was nothing, well, then things were the same as they'd always been. If he looked at her like she was the south end of a northbound slug, then she would know he was disgusted by her feelings. But if he looked at her like he saw her...well, she didn't dare to hope that could be true. Because that meant he was the other person with her memory and he didn't hate her. But after class this week, again, she only caught sight of his back as he retreated from the room. *Damn*.

Draco had put a lot of thought into Luna Lovegood. He watched her. But he was very careful to make sure no one knew that he watched her, most especially Luna herself. He never saw her talking with anyone in the hallways except occasionally the Weasley girl. And even then it was really just the Weasley girl prattling on and on and Luna interjecting a word here and there. He didn't see her too much in his regular schedule so he had to start going round the long way to some of his classes to catch a glimpse.

He had nearly been found out one day when Pansy Parkinson noticed him striding down the hall that led to the tower stairwell for Divination class, but he had turned her curiosity back on her by telling her he was headed to see Madam Pomfrey, which he'd hurriedly realized was about the only other thing he knew of that was along about this part of the castle. His teeth were clenched the whole time he gave his lame excuse, because it amounted to admitting that he was unwell, that he was weak. Malfoys did not go to the nurse. Bleeding Mudbloods went to the nurse to get put back together. But that was better than having his real mission found out. He silently berated himself, determined to have a cover story already worked out when he next decided to go out following Luna.

He had been driving himself batty thinking about her. He knew what classes she had, and if he were to be honest, that was about all he had found out. She didn't have any mutual friends with him, of course, but that meant there was no one he could casually get information from. The idea he kept coming back to was that if he wanted to get to know Luna, he was going to have to do it by talking directly to Luna. And that he did not know if he was willing to do. Frustrated, he dragged his hands through his hair. He had been up since dawn pacing across his room, back and forth past the foot of his bed. There was nothing for it. He was going to have to face the trifling girl.

With a growl he dropped his head back and closed his eyes. *So much for Slytherin cunning*, he thought, with a sneer tugging at the corner of his mouth. He was going to go to Hogsmeade today, hoping to forget he had ever felt Luna inside his mind and relived his darkest humiliation in front of her. He was going to pretend everything was okay. And then tomorrow he would get his wits about him and find her. He would track her down and talk to her. He would face her at last.

Draco had never thought much about the walk to Hogsmeade, he realized as he set out on it alone. He was up so early that he was one of the first ones in the Great Hall for breakfast, and he was out and on his way before most of the students had finished eating. The air was cold and the trees all wore their brightest autumn plumage. It was a lovely day despite the chilling breeze.

He was giving himself a pep talk about how he wasn't going to think about Luna at all today when he spotted her. Bloody hell. She was sitting on a stone bridge that spanned the shallow creek. She was wearing a pink coat and blue jeans and silly pink track shoes on her feet, which were swinging back and forth. She was looking off into the distance. He snorted. Yeah, that was the Luna he was used to seeing. This could be his opportunity to talk to her, he thought. She was right there; it was just her and him.

He gazed at her. Her hair was flattened to her head with a pale pink knitted hat, and the cold air had brought a pink to her cheeks to outdo her winter wear. She was pretty, he thought. Her eyes slipped over to him as if reluctant to leave the point in the sky that had transfixed her. "Oh, hello, Draco," she called softly.

"Luna," he answered gruffly. "Did you lose your way to town?" The words sort of fell out of his mouth of their own accord. They managed to sound halfway between taunting and a genuine question.

"Oh, no," she answered. "I know the way." Her response left him a little confused. She apparently had taken him literally, and her simple response left the conversation flat. There was no natural response he could make to what she'd said.

"Glad to hear it," he replied at last, and he tried to lace his words with sarcasm to cover his discomfort. He stared at her for another few moments before turning back towards the town and continuing on. She had smiled contentedly at him the whole time, saying nothing. This girl was going to drive him mad. He berated himself for his social ineptitude. He could work his way through crowded ballrooms, greeting family acquaintances and meeting esteemed guests with practiced ease, but it felt so awkward trying to get to know this slip of a girl he felt he already knew from the inside out.

He was just up to the bend in the road and was turning back, determined to go to her and try again, when he saw Ginny Weasley and Dean Thomas walk up to Luna, who jumped down from her perch. The pair were holding hands, and it occurred to Draco that they had probably planned to go to town together as a group. Ginny and Dean were making cow-eyes at one another, and Luna said something he couldn't hear. Ginny turned to her in question but Luna just nodded and gave her a smile. Ginny turned to Dean with a sickening love-struck expression and the two started towards Draco.

He darted around the bend so they wouldn't see that he was ahead of them and realize he had been watching their whole exchange with Luna. This must be what the red-haired girl had been babbling on about to Luna in the hallways, a schoolgirl crush on Dean. Draco sneered. But what about Luna? It seemed she had been waiting for them. Ah...suddenly it dawned on him. Luna had been waiting for the girl Weasley, but when she arrived she had Dean in tow. He must have asked to accompany Ginny to Hogsmeade, and Luna, seeing she would be the third wheel, bowed out and let the couple go on without her. *That selfish git*, he silently cursed Ginny. She was leaving Luna all alone. But... wasn't that the same thing he was doing? He hadn't asked Luna to go along with him. He hadn't even considered it until he realized she was being abandoned by her friend.

He stopped in his tracks and let out an exasperated sigh. Disgruntled by his own feeling of unease, he turned on his heel and started back towards the castle and Luna. But then he thought about having to pass Weasley and Thomas on the way back at this early hour of the morning. It would seem odd. Too odd, he supposed. So he pivoted again on his heel, starting to feel like a toy soldier doing marching drills. He was also starting to feel absolutely shirty about his predicament. Since when did a Malfoy languish in indecision? No, he was going to pull himself together. He had intended to clear his mind today, but suddenly he realized he wasn't going to feel any relief for his unease until he talked to Luna.

And Luna was just a girl, he reasoned, growing more confident as he thought it through. He knew a thing or two about girls. Luna wasn't like all the other girls around the school, that was true. There were judgmental girls, foolish girls, the adoring fans of Scarhead, and conniving girls from his own House of Slytherin, none of whom had particularly sparked his interest. But he caught girls looking at him with doe-eyes. He had dated. He'd heard his friends talking about their girlfriends. He knew girls liked to have attention paid to them. He'd overheard some girls gushing something about being made to feel like they were the only person in the world, whatever that meant. He supposed it just meant he had to make Luna feel like there was no one else he would rather be talking to. Not like Ginny, who made plans with her but really wanted to be with Dean. Well, that would be easy enough since in truth he only wanted to be with Luna. In fact, the thought of any of his housemates interrupting had him grinding his teeth in frustration. He had himself in quite a state over this girl. Well, no more. There was no need to get worked up. He would just apply a little Malfoy charm and some Slytherin cunning and this whole situation would fall neatly into place. He hoped.

Luna was enjoying the cold, quiet morning. She had agreed to go to Hogsmeade with Ginny and help her catch the eye of Dean Thomas, the boy Ginny had a huge crush on. Luna sighed. It had been difficult to give Ginny her full attention in the past week because she had been so caught up with thoughts of Draco Malfoy. She had tried to follow Ginny's rapid chattering and nod encouragingly, but she only caught part of what was being said. No matter, she thought; she would give Ginny her full attention today.

Her mouth tugged up at the corners in a dreamy smile. She had decided to take the day off from worrying about Draco. Oh, he was something to smile about, all right, but her thoughts had been drifting to him more and more. She'd even started thinking she saw him in the hallways, even though she knew he didn't have the same classes as her. She wasn't going to confront him, though. She was a patient person. And she knew he was proud. She might just be imagining a connection between them, in any

case. He might not give her so much as a passing glance.

Just as she was thinking this and trying to keep her errant thoughts in order, she glanced back towards the castle to see if Ginny had appeared yet. She froze, startled to see none other than Draco himself headed swiftly towards her. The sun was making his platinum hair all the brighter in contrast to his black jumper and slacks. Luna made no effort to turn away, and her face lit up with a smile. She was genuinely pleased to see him. He seemed confounded by her but not disgusted. After they had exchanged a few words he carried on towards the village, and she stayed where she was to wait for Ginny. She was sublimely happy now that she knew Draco would still look her in the eyes and that he could still stand talking to her.

Just a few minutes later Ginny did appear with Dean in tow, and Luna's Saturday was neatly freed up. She liked Hogsmeade well enough, but it was nature she was craving. She wanted to feel ground softer than stone corridors under her feet, feel a breeze sweeter than the stale castle air. She loved living at Hogwarts, of course, but she missed the freedom of living a more private, isolated existence. The Forbidden Forest was off-limits, but there was still the lake. She headed there, not disappointed in the least to have the day to herself.

Looking for Trouble

Chapter 5 of 17

Draco seeks a magical way to break the ice with Luna. Will he get a warm reception?

□

Luna had made a nest of sorts out of fallen leaves and propped herself against a tree trunk by the lakeshore. She was waving her wand about lazily and singing to herself, humming the song she and her father liked to dance to during her lessons. Isolated though her life was, she still was instructed in formal manners and etiquette by her parents. But she danced in bare feet to the few battered records her father had around the house. It was not conventional ballroom training, to be sure, and though she thought she would probably never need to use her formal training, it was fun to learn in any case. She hummed and practiced the charm Professor McGonagall had taught her to make bluebirds. She was directing their flight with her wand pointed skyward.

That was how Draco found her. A trio of little birds was circling above her, fluttering along with her song.

"Going to teach them to deliver your mail? What've you got against owls, Lovegood?" she heard a familiar voice ask dryly. Her smile brightened but she did not look away from her birds.

"Draco, you're back," she said simply. She brought the bluebirds lower to hover in front of him. He smirked at them but his arm rose up seemingly of its own accord and the delicate birds landed gently on his outstretched arm, one after another. They set about grooming their feathers and chirping at their landing post. His smirk melted into a smile.

"That's quite a trick, Luna," he said softly.

"I asked Professor McGonagall how to make bluebirds," she answered, and then, with a whip of her wand, she cast the birds spiraling skyward, where they hovered for a moment before turning back into the fallen leaves they had started out as and drifted lazily to the ground. Her Transfiguration completed, she looked at her visitor.

"Did you manage what you set out about this morning?" she asked him as a greeting.

Crinkling his brow but otherwise seeming to ignore her question, he asked, "Aren't you cold down there?"

She frowned slightly, her brow furrowed in thought. "Yes, a bit."

"Come on, then," he said with a chuckle, "have a drink with me. It'll warm you up!"

"Oh" She was startled by this casual invitation. Did he mean to take her into town? At her pause Draco's smile started to slip. She noticed his face falling and knew at once that she had offended him. This was the first time he had sought her out, and he was treating her like a complete equal. She couldn't let him think she was rejecting him.

She scrambled up awkwardly, stiff from the cold. "I had thought I might avoid the crowds today," she said in a rush. At least it was a rush for Luna, who normally spoke very slowly. "I" Her eyes fluttered down for just a moment before she confessed, "I was hoping not to run into Ginny and Dean." Luna continued frankly, "I bowed out so they could spend the day together, and I'm afraid if they see me they'll feel obligated to include me." She looked at him, gravely serious and appraising, as if measuring his response to her next words. "I've so little time to myself, I'd much rather spend it with people who want to be with me."

Draco blinked. He supposed she must recognize the way she was treated by the other students, but even taking that into consideration he wasn't quite prepared for her bluntness. He was used to girls being coy when they talked to him. But Luna projected the same bare honesty he had encountered in her mind during their Legilimency practice.

He cleared his throat. "Don't worry, Luna, I didn't mean to drag you into town." He reached into his back pocket and revealed a flask. "Instead, I brought the Three Broomsticks to you." He unscrewed the flask and looked at her roguishly. His lips twisted into his signature sneer and he took a swig. He wiped the neck of the flask with his sleeve and then stepped over to the edge of the nest of leaves Luna was sitting on. With a look of the utmost solemnity he bent to one knee and held out the hand holding the flask. "Would you join me in a drink, Miss Lovegood?" Draco offered quietly.

Luna's face positively lit up at Draco's display. "Thank you, kind sir, I would be most honored." She accepted the proffered drink and took a small swig. It was butterbeer, still warm, and Luna thought she could taste some froth on the tip of her tongue as she drank. With a whimper of pleasure she took another pull, deeper this time. "Mmmmm, Draco, that's good. Thank you." A warm feeling started tingling in her tummy. Draco smiled at the look of pleasure on her face. It was a good idea, charming this warming flask, he congratulated himself. Pleased, he dropped back to sit on the ground with his leg bent in front of him.

"Oh, Draco, the cold is going to go straight into you, sitting on the grass like that. Here, come sit on the leaves. They'll help insulate you from the chill," she blurted out without thinking. Draco raised an eyebrow at her as she looked at him in concern. He wasn't sure at first how he felt about being told what to do, but she seemed so sincere in her worry that he figured she hadn't meant to boss him. He also wasn't sure about snuggling up to her on her little nest of leaves, but he lifted himself off the grass to settle next to her. "Budge up, birdie," he said lightly as she shuffled over to the side to make room for him. They sat watching the surface of the lake ripple in the autumn breeze for a long time, neither one feeling pressed to make conversation, but every so often passing the flask back and forth.

The breeze started to kick up and scatter leaves onto the surface of the water. "Draco," she whispered so softly that he thought maybe he'd heard his name on the wind

itself.

"Hmm?" he answered, still looking across the lake as it rippled. She was silent for so long that he was sure he had heard his name in the trees instead of from her lips.

"What did you tell Blaise?" she asked at last. "I mean, what did you say about, you know, my Mum?"

"Blaise?" he asked, truly puzzled for a moment. Ah. He finally remembered. Blaise had walked out of class with him the day Draco had seen Luna's memory. He turned to look at her in earnest. "I said I saw rain. I figured that was common enough, living in the UK." She turned to meet his gaze, looking straight into his eyes as he answered her.

"Thank you."

"I figured you hadn't meant for me to see that, any more than I meant for you to see what you did."

She nodded. "Yes, that's true."

He was the first to break his gaze away. "Why do you think all this is happening to us? Karma?" He laughed derisively.

"I don't know. I know it made me feel very vulnerable. Not that I was keeping her death a secret, just that somebody knowing my Mum died and sharing the experience with them are two very different things."

"Mmm" he hummed in answer, looking down at his lap before continuing. "I wouldn't have told anyone or shared the experience you saw, not purposely, not ever." After a pause he continued. "But I guess it's best that it was you. I mean, no one around here is likely to get the story from you, are they? You're not exactly chatting up the student body. Not the most popular girl amongst our peers."

"Oh, no. I mean, I get attention, but it hardly ever has anything to do with me personally." At his puzzled look she explained. "Oh, well, the girls in my dorm play jokes on me, and people talk when I walk by but they don't know me. There's no one here I really talk to."

Instantly Draco felt like a cad. What he'd said was true, but it sounded so brutal when he said it out loud. Luna took it all in stride, though, just as matter of fact about it as he was.

They lapsed into silence once more. The wind seemed to turn on them for a moment, enough to give Luna a chill, and she shivered. He passed her the flask once more and she took another drink from it. The warm tingling felt wonderful. She was startled by his voice when he started talking again.

"Jokes, Luna?" It took her a moment to realize that he was asking her about what she had just explained to him.

"Oh, sometimes the girls in my House like to have a bit of sport. Like one time one of the girls cast a charm on me to give me bunny ears while I was sleeping. It's good for me that it was the day of a Quidditch match and my Ravenclaw hat covered them. Not that I would mind wearing bunny ears, necessarily, but she's not so good at charms so they were lopsided and a terrible shade of turquoise."

"Luna," he said, disapproval in his voice.

"Oh, I don't think it'll happen again. I've been sleeping in the common room. There's an armchair that's quite comfortable. I do get a cramp in my neck sometimes, but it's better than those bunny ears. They itched something terrible," she said with a smile that was meant to make light of the ordeal.

"Luna," he repeated softly, almost sadly.

She turned to smile at him then and wiggled her nose in a rabbit impression. "I might've made a pretty good bunny, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. You build a pretty good nest. And your eyes are as blue as those birds you were making. To me, I think you're a birdie."

Her mouth pulled into a silly crooked smile. Involuntarily, she shivered from the cold. It was just instinct, he told himself later, that made him put his arm around her, pulling her close to him to share some of his body heat. As if realizing what he had done, he looked away and said regretfully, "I think it might be getting too cold for us here. Do you want to head inside?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I don't want to go to my common room. I don't need to go to the Library. All I have left to do for homework is that essay for Professor Snape, so I don't really have anywhere else to be." Suddenly her eyes lit up and she pulled her wand from behind her ear. "Hermione taught me something that should help." She murmured and sparks flew from the tip of her wand to make a magical fire.

Luna rarely had anyone she could talk to, but she was always forthright in her manner. Draco was often surrounded by people with whom he conversed but around whom he didn't feel he could be himself. Both felt relieved for the time being, Luna for the sake of the company and Draco for the fact that the formality he had displayed when he'd offered Luna the flask was playful and not perfunctory. They stayed by the lake, talking if they felt like it and sitting in easy silence when it felt right. It wasn't until they got hungry that they begrudgingly decided to head back into the castle.

"Usually I can ask the house-elves to give me a packed lunch when I plan to be out of doors for the day, but I thought I'd be with Ginny, so I didn't. It's too bad. I don't want this to end," Luna said quietly as she rose.

"Ah, it's for the best," Draco said philosophically. "Familiarity breeds contempt, after all. I'd hate for you to get sick of me."

"Good point, Mr. Malfoy," she said in mock seriousness. "In that case, I can't bear to be around you another minute. Any more and I'll be seeing you in my dreams." She sobered at her own words, realizing how much they revealed. If Draco was alarmed, he didn't show it.

"Go ahead without me, Draco, if you like. I mean, so that you're on the path alone. I'd hate for you to end up Billy No-mates just because you happened upon me." She set about extinguishing her magical fire.

"In a way, that's very thoughtful of you," he said carefully, "but I think you misjudge me, Luna, because your words paint me as a cad and you as a social pariah."

"Oh, no, Draco, no. I'm glad for your company. I'm not asking you to broadcast that you spent time with me. It just seems that what people think of you is pretty important in your life. I don't want you to feel forced by circumstance. Or karma," she said wryly, using his earlier words to illustrate her point. He had pretty much compared their intimacy in the Legilimency classes to a punishment of the fates.

"Miss Lovegood," he said formally, taking her hand in his and bending to ghost a kiss across her knuckles, "would you bestow upon me the privilege of accompanying you to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry? Without this kind favor I fear I may not find my way," he said with a gentle smile.

Her returning expression was brilliant. She took on a mock-formal air to match his and tipped her head, curtsying slowly. "I would be most pleased, sir," was her softly spoken reply.

He placed her hand in the crook of his arm and led the way back to the path that headed towards the school. Luna needn't have worried, as it turned out they didn't pass anyone along their way. They parted company just inside the front doors. Luna's smile hadn't dimmed a bit since the moment Draco had asked her to accompany him. He hoped that meant he had succeeded, that he had made her feel like she was the only girl in the world. For him, on that day, she had been.

He stood immobile as she turned and headed up the stairs away from him. "And, Luna," Draco called softly, "I came ~~looking~~ for you today. Because I did want to be with you."

Pleasureable Punishment

Chapter 6 of 17

Luna provokes Professor Snape but she isn't the only one to face his wrath. Maybe Draco can find a way to make their punishment more to his liking.

It was the following week in Legilimency class when Luna next saw Draco. She had been running behind on her way to class. She was waylaid when someone cast a spell to tie her shoelaces to each other and tripped her, the fall causing her books to spill everywhere. She thought for a moment about the time that Draco had spilled her books on her way to class. He hadn't laughed at her. Incredibly, he had stooped to pick up her books and actually carried them for her! She had been stunned. It was such a sweet memory that it contented her as she gathered up her things. The notes she had been working on for Professor Snape's essay about wizarding laws were, sadly, trampled beyond repair. Luna sighed; now she would be forced to try to remember what the lecture had been about. She knew from experience that Professor Snape would make no accommodation for her on account of her lost notes. He would also make no accommodation for her being late, she thought, and with that she scrambled on her way to class.

She did not make it in time. She had made an effort to rush, to lessen her tardiness, but she would not cower before Professor Snape. She knew the reason for her lateness would not matter to him and she would not embarrass herself by making excuses. She knew that even an apology would interrupt him speaking and would be poorly received in any case, so she made her way as silently as she could to her seat and slid into it, casting a shy smile over towards Draco, who was eying her with eyebrows raised as if to question why she was late. Maybe he was concerned about her? The thought kept her slight smile on her lips.

True to form, Professor Snape did not break stride in his lecturing, but when Luna tried to get out her parchment and quill, her papers came out of her bag in a sort of haphazard glob that fell apart, spilling noisily onto her desk. It was too much to hope that he would resist scolding her in the most condescending of tones. She set about straightening her things, and she did it as quietly as she could, keeping her eyes on what she was doing. "Miss Lovegood, since you have decided my class should begin at your whim instead of on my schedule, Ravenclaw will be relieved of five points. And for your appalling sense of organization, Ravenclaw will surrender another five points. If you will be subjecting us to any further interruption, I would ask that you do it now so we can continue with our lesson."

"Oh, thank you, Professor," Luna answered in a sweet, sing-songy voice. She turned and buried her attention in her bag, digging about until she finally reappeared with a wrinkled brow and an expression of consternation. Taking her wand from behind her ear she said, "*Accio quill!*" with a dreadful scowl still in place. It was replaced with a look of triumph once she was holding her quill, which was the oddest color of purple.

Professor Snape had clearly made his comment to taunt her, not as an invitation for her to do what she had done. But she did it with such innocent seriousness that he was astounded, and in truth he wondered if the foolish child might be touched in the mind. With a pained sigh, he stared at her as she rummaged hopelessly in her messy bag, only to produce the most ridiculous quill he had ever seen. "Lovegood, where are your notes from last week?"

"Oh, sir, I'm sorry. I'm quite sure Painted Dwarnglads were in my dorm last night. They come out at midnight and nip parchments, you know. Use them for their nests," she added as if trying to educate the professor.

"Miss Lovegood, that is the most ridiculous thing I have heard this entire term. For your gross lack of preparedness and insufferable nonsense you will have detention Friday evening. There you can do extra class work, and as such your partner will also need to attend. Perhaps as the Slytherin Seeker, missing a Quidditch practice will sufficiently motivate Mr. Malfoy that he may be an inspiration to you to make more of an effort in my class." All the Slytherins in the class glared at her then, and some even hissed. Luna turned as red as her radish earrings. She didn't mind antagonizing Snape when the brunt of his anger fell on her, but she hadn't intended for his punishment to extend to Draco as well. While Snape stared daggers at Luna, her face flushed.

Draco couldn't help but feel a pull of camaraderie for the girl. "It's all right," he called out to the class. "I could beat Hufflepuff on a school broomstick." Blaise punched Draco in the shoulder affectionately and the hissing turned to cheers of encouragement. Luna was able to break her gaze from Snape then and looked back down at her desk.

"If we might be able to turn our attention back to today's lesson?" Snape hissed, confident that he had drawn the wrath of all upon the hapless girl. "Since you have an assignment due in my class in two weeks I have arranged for the Library to be made available to you for today's class time. I realize the practical exercises were too much for most of you, and that was as I intended. It was important to illustrate to you the seriousness of the art and the level of difficulty involved. Now we are reverting to a part of the study of Legilimency that I do hope you will be less incompetent at: the academic aspect. Once you have more information about the laws, the uses, and the defensive applications, we will return to the techniques and attempt their use again. Most likely it will be a fruitless exercise of sharing the finer points of delicate arts to those incapable of appreciating them.

"However, you are all to report to the Library now to work on your written assignments. You can find your own research on the wizarding prosecution of Methilius and Lisbeth Glump and the study of Legilimens aberrations rather than me wasting my time lecturing on the details of the material you will need to include in your essay. If Miss Lovegood doesn't need to come to class on time to hear the lessons, then certainly the lot of you can do without me spoon-feed you the information. You should be able to do the research for yourselves." Abruptly Snape turned and strode back to his worktable, returning his attention to the paperwork he had been immersed in before the class began.

He had a lot of work to do for Professor Dumbledore and hadn't the time to lead a class today, so he'd had to make arrangements for them to be monitored in the Library. The girl's tardiness had provoked him, and he had hung his impatience and ire squarely on her. The assignment Dumbledore had given him was a tricky one, and if he failed, all the Legilimency lessons in the world would not save Luna Lovegood or the rest of her classmates from the dreadful fate that threatened them.

The students packed up their things and headed towards the Library, bewildered by what had just happened. Snape had never let them out early, much less skipped an opportunity to lecture until the very last moment of the class period. They weren't sure whether they should be grateful for the reprieve from his lecturing or worried because they now had to do their research unguided.

Draco, however, was unconcerned. He remained in his chair as the other students filed out of the room, until only he and Luna were still seated. She had been trying to carefully repack her bag for the walk to the Library, shamed and oblivious to her surroundings. When she slid from her seat she heaved her bag onto her back and turned just in time to come face to face with Draco Malfoy. He was towering over her with mischief in his eyes and an irresistible smirk on his face.

"Shall we?" he asked, and the best response she could muster up was a weak nod. They turned and headed side by side out into the hall. The other students had all gone ahead, so they were able to stroll along with relative privacy. Draco himself was not sure of his intentions, but he was pleased to be free of the classroom. "So, Luna, it

seems you will be depriving me of a Quidditch practice."

"I am so sorry about that, Draco," she said, truly remorseful. "It seems a person can't even earn herself a punishment from Professor Snape any more. Instead he decided to punish everyone so *they* can all punish me," she mused distractedly.

"I get to punish you, huh?" Draco asked. Abruptly Luna looked at him, worried about what his odd tone signified. "Hmm," he continued. "Well, my Quidditch practice is very relaxing, it helps me unwind. And if I'm giving that up, I suppose you could find some way to compensate me. I think I will extract my punishment on you right now." Luna's eyes widened as he continued. "All the books we would need to work on Snape's essay will be in use by the rest of the class. That batty old Librarian will never notice we aren't there, and the other students will think Snape kept us behind to yell at us some more. We're free! And you said yourself that you owe me. Come with me; we have someplace better to be than the Library." Draco congratulated himself on this latest impromptu piece of Slytherin cunning. Although he wasn't certain what prompted his actions, he had just maneuvered Luna unto spending the rest of the afternoon with him.

Luna hadn't stopped walking alongside Draco all the while he had been speaking. After a moment's hesitation she replied placidly, "Okay Draco." Luna realized she was contentedly accompanying him, but she was a bit scattered about what was going on. The thought that Draco might be upset with her was disquieting. He sounded like he was teasing, but he'd actually said he was going to punish her for getting him stuck in detention with Snape. She wouldn't blame him for being upset with her. She had been flippant with Professor Snape, thinking he would take it out only on her, and even accepting that she might lose her House some points, but what Snape had done was thoroughly unexpected.

"Hey, Luna," Draco said, interrupting her ponderings. "What's a Painted Dwarnglad?"

Luna set her earrings swinging when she shook her head. Smiling gently she answered, "I have no idea." Draco's laughter echoed down the stone corridor.

Daytime Stargazing

Chapter 7 of 17

Draco and Luna find a way to spend a stolen afternoon.

They entered the deserted Astronomy Tower, and Luna thought maybe Draco needed to work on some Astronomy homework. Students from mixed grades were grouped in Legilimency, but Draco was a year ahead of her. She wondered if he remembered that, because she would be of no help to him with his Astronomy work. Besides, it was daytime; there were no stars to see up here. But there was a lovely view. Draco dropped his bag and pulled out two thick textbooks, setting them side by side. Taking off his robes, he laid them over the books, and then with a swish of his wand he turned the lot into a squishy sort of beanbag couch and unceremoniously flung himself into it.

Draco was trying determinedly to act casual and even teasing to put Luna at ease. He felt a little uncomfortable for having used guilt to force her to come along with him, but the ends justified the means, or so it's said. As to what ends he was working towards, he remained uncertain. Draco just knew he had enjoyed the peaceful respite of Luna's company and he wanted more. He craved more of her attention to himself; more privacy to be himself with her and to enjoy her easygoing nature and odd but endearing humor. He looked up towards her and noticed that she stood unmoving in the doorway.

"What's the matter? Have you never skipped a class before?" She shook her head. He laughed. "It's okay, and you're not doing anything too terrible."

"No more terrible than being late for class, then?" she asked with a wry grin. His smile faded at that. He patted the seat beside him. "I don't know why Professor Snape was in such a foul temper today, but he was in a nasty mood before you got there. Don't worry so much. A little detention is no big deal to me. I've been through worse." He smiled wryly but it didn't reach his eyes.

"But you didn't do anything wrong to deserve it," she persisted, her sense of fairness offended.

"No," Draco answered thoughtfully, "but I don't mind spending my Friday night with you. Even if Snape will be there." She blushed at his statement. He was going out of his way to be kind and take her mind off what had happened. He was being a good friend, and that was all.

"Thanks," she said. "I hope he doesn't tie your grade to mine for the class. I really don't have my notes from last week. They got destroyed today."

"Destroyed?"

"Yeah, well, I tripped, and when everything fell out of my bag the notes got trampled before I could pick them up. It was just an accident. I really could use a spell for my shoelaces so they can't be hexed to tangle themselves up like that. Look!" She produced the ruined parchment. "They're useless," she concluded solemnly.

"Luna, you mean you were trying to pick up all your stuff and that's why you were late? You made us all believe you were lost in one of your daydreams, and that bag of yours has always been a disaster."

"My reputation does serve a purpose. Looney Lovegood can barely keep track of where she is, much less keep track of her schoolwork, right?" It was Luna's turn to offer a wry smile. "I didn't want to draw any attention to why I was late. I don't worry about letting everyone think what they want about me. I got carried away, though. I shouldn't have made fun of him that way. That's what made him punish you, too."

"Just knowing you got away with telling Snape to hold on so you could dig out your quill is unbelievable. Watching his face...that was the most reaction I've ever seen him show towards any student. I almost couldn't keep from laughing."

"Well, at least there was some good in it, then. I'm glad you got a laugh, especially since you'll be paying so dearly for it."

"Luna. Stop looking at the bad that came from it and enjoy our stolen afternoon. Here, let's get you a copy of the notes and we'll have you sorted out in no time." Draco dug out his notes from their last class and set about the spell that would copy them to a blank parchment for Luna. As he worked he considered this girl who had faced down Professor Snape. And she had done it just to keep her circumstances private. He could be sure she wasn't going to betray his confidence willingly. She had a lot more substance and character than he'd ever thought. True, she was dreamy and gentle, and probably at least part of the daffy side of her reputation had merit as well. There was more to her, though, and it was just by chance that he'd had the opportunity to see it.

If they hadn't had the forced intimacy of the Legilimency class they wouldn't know the depths of each other's characters. They wouldn't have had any reason to trust in each other. But Draco was starting to feel that Luna could be trusted, and he was surprised by how much he wanted that. She was bluntly honest with him. He was the one who had been sneaking around, spying on her. He found that he looked forward to catching glimpses of her, and he wished he didn't have to hide when he did it. He wanted to

talk to her in the halls. He wanted her to walk beside him to class. He wanted to see her face up close instead of from across the corridor. Luna's face, he mused, was delicate and framed by masses of gently curling hair. He wanted her to look up at him with her dreamy blue eyes. He wanted to smell the sweet smell of her that he had first noticed when they'd sat so close to each other on the lake shore. He was attracted to her, he realized. And she was here, alone with him, now. There would be no better time to find out if she had a similar attraction towards him.

She had set about re-ordering her travesty of a book bag. Once it was put to rights again, she let out sigh for a job well done and took the seat he had offered next to him on the little couch. "How did you know the tower would be deserted just now?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"I knew because I'm older and wiser than you. My many years here at Hogwarts, a school rich in its history, have taught me a great deal," he said in a mock-pompous lecturing voice. "Not all of it has been about wizardry, you know. There's also Quidditch." At this she frowned, reminded of the practice that he'd be missing. "And I have refined the art of how not to be found. I suppose you are rather talented at that as well. I know some secrets of the castle; of course, they're mostly only good for Slytherins. I've also learned some techniques for how to slyly maneuver pretty girls into deserted spots so I can have them all to myself."

"I see," she said, mostly because she couldn't for the life of her think of anything else to say. "Well, Mr. Malfoy, truly you are most accomplished. I must congratulate you; you have now, on two separate occasions, maneuvered me into deserted spots with you," she said in a teasing voice. Then the thought occurred to her that he might not have been referring to her. Softly she tried to continue in her teasing tone, but it came out a little strained. "Are you using me for practice, then?"

Draco had been smiling to go along with their lighthearted banter, but now he took on a serious expression and leaned towards her so that he was looking directly into her eyes. "Luna Lovegood, I have been purposely trying to get you to myself in order that I might be the sole recipient of your attention." In contrast to his intensity, he leaned back and smiled lightly. "Plus I thought you might like the view from up here." She nodded her head distractedly.

"It's you I want to be with just now, Luna. But if you don't return the sentiment, then of course you can go. I absolve you of the debt you think you owe me. No harm done."

Luna shook her head with mock solemnity to indicate that she didn't want to leave. "No, I'd like to stay here with you even knowing your nefarious purpose."

Draco's smile turned up even more at one corner and melted into a smirk she had seen before, but never from so close up. Her eyes were trapped there, studying his lips and wondering how they would feel if he kissed her. She bet they'd be warm; she remembered how warm he had been when they'd been out by the lake and he had tucked her under his arm to save her from the cold.

"Are you okay, birdie?" he asked softly. She met his eyes again, looking a little unfocused, and he could see her chest was moving in shallow little breaths. He was really enjoying the effect he had on her. Of course it was always flattering to see the effect his charm had on women, but it was different this time. He wasn't doing it for sport; he had been quite nervous when he leaned in to talk to her. He didn't know what to expect from Luna, but he was very pleased by her reaction. She nodded that she was all right, and that was the answer he had needed to make sure he wasn't misreading her or forcing unwelcome advances on her. She was an innocent and might not know what to expect when he leaned in to kiss her, so he moved slowly.

She didn't back away, although when he was very near her and still moving slowly so as not to spook her, she did flutter her eyes closed. That was her invitation to him; she knew he wanted to kiss her and she was going to let him. He started to tip his head to the side to angle his face towards her when she tipped her face up and closed the distance between them. He was surprised, and pleased, and totally absorbed in the feeling of her lips on his.

Draco Malfoy was going to kiss her. She could tell. At least she thought she could tell. What else would he be doing coming closer and closer to her like he was? Did she want him to kiss her? Oh, yes, she thought, she wanted him to. She appreciated his gentleness, truly, and wanted to show him that she returned the interest in feeling his mouth on hers. When she tipped her face up to meet his she was rewarded by warm lips; she knew they'd be warm. What she didn't know was what to do next. Well, Draco had told her he'd brought her here on purpose. He had probably gotten a few girls alone before; surely he knew what to do. She would just do what he did, she decided reasonably.

He started to nibble slowly on her lower lip, sensuously, so she did the same, giving the same caressing attention to him. He captured her lower lip between his and she felt the heat of his tongue as he grazed it across her lip. She faltered for a quick moment, not having expected such a thing. They continued their slow little dance until she took a turn at capturing his lip gently between hers. She had been genuinely surprised when he first touched her with his tongue. She didn't know what came next. She tried to gently do the same thing he had done to her by brushing her tongue across his lip, but he surprised her again by meeting her hesitant tongue with his. Their kisses turned into tentative explorations as she tried to mimic the wonderful things Draco was doing. He laced his hand into the hair behind her ear, his graceful fingers ghosting along her scalp to rest easily at the nape of her neck. As if this was a signal to Luna that it was okay to touch him, she reached her hands blindly towards him, placing them on his chest.

When Draco felt her hands he slowed for a moment, thinking she might be preparing to push him away, but she pursued him, trying to recapture his lips when he paused. To accompany her pursuit of reclaiming his attentions, she dragged her hands up his chest and threaded them around his neck. His hand slid from her neck down to rest at the small of her back. She was amazing, and she was eating him alive. She returned every trick he tried to use on her. But her demeanor was more than he had been prepared for. He supposed he had been expecting reluctant kisses, but he was getting such intimacy and surrender. He couldn't think, couldn't sort out what he was doing. She was kissing him in a way he had never been kissed before. And Draco Malfoy had most assuredly been kissed before. What made Luna so special was the emotion she was sharing with him in her movements and the way she bared herself for him, becoming vulnerable and letting him lead her, letting him inside her mouth to taste her and returning his attention by teasing him with her delicate tongue. She was blindly trusting in him and he didn't want to screw that up.

Draco had to get some air; he had to think. He tried to back off but she was possessing his mouth now, just as he had hers moments ago, and she was leaning into him. And then she reversed strategies, backing up as he just had, but not releasing his lips. She was drawing him with his mouth mated to hers, pulling him towards her with a gentle pressure of her arms as they rested behind his neck. She was going to be the death of him.

He groaned in the back of his throat and she reacted timidly, withdrawing from him completely. He didn't open his eyes for a moment, and when he did he saw her looking worriedly at him. He tried to smile to comfort her, but he was overwrought. "Bloody hell!" he whispered. After a few deep, ragged breaths he continued, "Give over, Luna. Tell me that wasn't your first kiss, was it?"

Her eyes were slightly alarmed. She had raised her fingers to her lips that were now a bit swollen and pink from their kiss. "Yes. It was." She tipped her head to the side a bit. "I don't understand, Draco. Wasn't I supposed to do that? Or is there another way that I was supposed to?"

"God's teeth, Luna, if there is another way I don't want to know about it, because that was . . ." He paused, at a loss for words. "Bloody hell!" he repeated. She still looked puzzled and he cursed himself for a fool. She was an innocent, he reminded himself, and needed reassurance. She'd never know what he meant if he just kept hurling foul language at her.

"That was the best kiss I have ever had, and I daresay it was in the running for the best kiss ever kissed in the whole of Britain."

She broke into a glorious grin. "I was worried I was doing something wrong when you growled at me. I'm glad I wasn't, because that was ever so good."

Draco laughed a tight laugh. "That growling meant you were doing everything just right. Too right, in fact, because it was me telling myself that I needed to stop."

"Oh!" Her mouth went round to match her eyes that had now returned to being troubled.

Draco wracked his brain for a way to explain himself to her without making her uncomfortable for being inexperienced. "Thing is, I don't want to get carried away. I, uh, may have a reputation, but I don't take this lightly and I don't want to rush anything. And it was feeling so good that my body was about to tell my mind to jog on and stop being sensible. I didn't want to lose control," he concluded, hoping he had made the remotest amount of sense to her.

But "Oh," was all she said. He was pretty sure she didn't know what he meant, but if he had anything to say about it she would understand someday. He loved kissing Luna, loved holding her. She made him feel so good and he wanted to make her feel the same way. Slowly. Respectfully. He wanted to snog her brains out!

Perception is the Enemy of Observation

Chapter 8 of 17

Draco sets a Slytherin ambush for Luna.

Luna had gotten a bit mucky in Hagrid's class. The creatures he had them tending were mokes, silver-green lizards that had grown to about the length of Luna's forearm. She had her little fellow calm and gentled until some student's noisy horseplay startled it and it shrank to only an inch in length and scampered into a pile of fallen leaves. This would not have been a messy issue if it weren't for the mud puddle the leaves concealed. Whether the mud was there before she headed over to re-capture the moke or had been "spelled" there by a mischievous student when Luna's back was turned, she could not say. In any case she ended up with muddy shoes, which had her slipping and ending up with muddy knees, and muddy hands as well. This was not too terrible an inconvenience, as she cast a Tergeo charm to relieve herself of the mud, but it had been cold mud and it was a breezy day. Luna still felt a chill as she headed back to the castle.

Luna had started at Hogwarts a year older than the classmates in her grade; she had wanted to stay home another year with her father, what with it being so soon after her mother's death. Headmaster Dumbledore and her father had allowed her that choice. That made her closer in age to Draco than people might realize. Now she was nearly seventeen, and she simply had never entertained romantic thoughts for any boys from school before. She hadn't had any schoolgirl crushes. But a boy had finally caught her eye. Not a boy, even...Draco was seventeen already; or he, too, would be soon. Luna was very nearly an adult, and she was starting to have adult thoughts about the platinum-haired Draco, the thought of whom had her insides fluttering.

In the Great Hall at midday Luna gratefully cupped a mug of hot cocoa and sipped gingerly from the steaming drink. A light eater, she mostly ignored the food for the warmth of the drink, which was sprinkled liberally with marshmallows. As she nursed the restorative chocolate she glanced slyly (she hoped) over the rim of her mug at the Slytherin table she just happened to be facing. She saw Draco...well, she saw the back of Draco. Spine straight and hair even paler than usual, he faced away from her. After a few moments of her gazing adoringly (she might as well admit it) at him, he glanced back at her and nodded in acknowledgement to her. His eyes were cast low, discreet and hooded, and sexy. Was it instinctive that his eyes were drawn to her or had he been paying attention to where she sat? Was it a flickering of the lights or had she seen him wink at her as he turned back around in his seat? A little giggle escaped her. This was a fun thing, flirting. She certainly liked having Draco's attention.

It crossed her mind that maybe she ought to consider what it might mean to be involved with the bad boy of Slytherin. In truth she just wanted to consider Draco Malfoy, but the two were inexorably entwined. He did have a nasty reputation. And he had truly been awful towards Harry. She knew that their classmates dismissed Draco as unredeemable. But she knew there was compassion in Draco's heart. And there was integrity. He was brave. And he was kind...to her.

Draco was accustomed to being hurt. It was no wonder he was defensive. Insecurity could so often be mistaken for unkindness, and shyness could be perceived as acting stuck-up. And once a schoolyard reputation was set, it was as good as written in stone. She would be seen as "loony Luna" and Draco was "the ferret," and no effort of theirs could change that.

With resignation Luna dismissed such unhappy thoughts and wondered if she would see Draco today, and then remembered they had detention together soon enough with Professor Snape. Luna had mixed feelings about that. Draco had said he didn't mind serving detention with her, but it was still so unfair that he had to miss a Quidditch practice.

Professor Snape was sure to be foul towards her. She would keep her spirits high through the experience; that would be sure to irritate him. She pondered what he might have her doing for penance. Scrubbing cauldrons, maybe. Or writing lines.

She would have to think of something she could do for Draco to make it up to him since he was to be forced to do such menial labor for her sake. If he enjoyed kissing her half as much as she had enjoyed kissing him, then maybe that might be a consolation they both could enjoy. Luna could feel a silly grin on her face but was powerless to conceal it. She knew she would have a hard time keeping her mind off the feel of Draco's chest under her hands, or the blue of his eyes from just inches away from her face. Draco Malfoy...who'd have thought it would be him giving Luna her first kiss? Luna decided it was a good day, with plenty of good thoughts to content her along the way.

Draco's sly lunchtime glance was the happy inspiration for her daydreams as she wandered down the corridor towards Charms class. And it was a sly glance she soon saw again. Tucked into an alcove along the way to class was Draco Malfoy, leaning against the stone wall and facing Luna as she approached. He had one foot up on the wall behind him with his knee bent, and his arms were folded across his chest. His head was lowered but his eyes were covertly scanning the crowd that was slowly moving past him. His hair fell just a little out of place to brush across his forehead. Luna liked that very much, better than the perfectly styled hair that never fell out of place which he wore most of the time. She wondered briefly what had provoked him to leave his hair more casual today. Her consideration was abandoned in the next moment as his eyes found her amid the mass of students.

A Malfoy never looks ill at ease. That was what Draco tried to remind himself of as he waited for Luna in the Charms hallway. He had a break that period for revising, but he knew from the time he'd spent trailing behind Luna that she headed to class this way every Thursday afternoon. She ambled into his line of sight, and as her gaze found him her eyes went round with surprise. He really liked getting that reaction from her. She looked so dainty, but he knew she had serious emotional fortitude. She was so strong for such a tiny girl. And she had magic, too. She had to have some powerful magic. And best of all, she was a great kisser.

Mmmm...the thought reminded him of his mission. He raised an eyebrow in the smirk that fit so naturally on his face and brought his face up slowly as Luna approached. As she neared him, he unfolded his arms and moved his elbow out away from his body, offering his arm to her. In response Luna's grinned happily. She reached out and as soon as she grasped his elbow he had a door opened with his other hand and was ushering her into a room she had never been in before. In a moment he had pulled the door closed behind them, and slipping his arm from under her hand to around her waist he spun her and pinned her against the back of the door. Luna giggled in a nervous response. Draco slid her bag down from her shoulder and gently tossed it off to the side.

"Got a minute?" he asked glibly.

"I have plenty of minutes, Draco. Would you like to spend some of them with me?"

"Yes, birdie, I would." Draco leaned down and pressed his smirking lips against Luna's. He let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding at the acceptance he received in Luna's arms as she wrapped them around his neck. She snaked her grasp around him as smoothly as he had maneuvered her against the door. She couldn't help but run her hands up his neck to touch his hair, which was delightfully soft today. He took a sharp breath as her fingertips reached the back of his scalp. Perhaps he enjoyed being touched there as much as she enjoyed the way his arms cradled her so securely when he held her. She was glad to return the affection by running her fingers up into the back of his hair.

After a few delightful moments Draco regretfully pulled back, setting his forehead against hers and trying to slow his breathing. He ghosted a light kiss on the tip of Luna's upturned nose.

"What a nice surprise," Luna whispered.

"Mmmm," murmured Draco. It was as close as he could come to words at the moment. "We still on for that date tomorrow night?" he asked, his voice gruff.

Luna's brow furrowed for a moment until she realized his meaning. There was no reason to be sulky about it. If Draco could keep it a light matter, then she would as well. "I wouldn't miss it. Do you suppose we should try to get Professor Snape to absolve us of our detention? Then we could go to your practice after all. Wouldn't it be nice to get outdoors and see the night sky?" Draco chuckled out loud at Luna's fanciful thoughts.

"Have you ever succeeded at that before? Getting out of a detention?"

"No, but I haven't failed at it, necessarily. I've just found lots of ways that don't work." The empty room echoed with baritone laughter complemented by a light melodic giggle.

After a few more stolen moments Luna stepped out of the classroom and continued on towards Charms class, her head truly in the clouds. Draco waited a few more minutes in the empty room, to collect his thoughts as much as to keep their rendezvous discreet, before he headed back out into the halls.

A/N "I haven't failed, I've found 10,000 ways that don't work." is a quote attributed to Thomas Edison.

Big Bad Malfoy

Chapter 9 of 17

Luna prepares herself to face Draco and put him to a test.

Who's afraid of the big bad Malfoy?

Luna was skipping down the hallway. It wasn't long before curfew, but she wanted to spend all the time she could out of her House before she had to settle in for another night in front of the fireplace, curled up in a chair. She didn't mind the chair, really, but she did feel a little odd since Draco had sounded so sad when she told him about her sleeping arrangements. It was time to resolve that particular issue.

With her time in the Library for research she had been studying about how to protect herself within the drawn curtains of her bed so no one could cast spells on her or sneak up with nefarious intent. She had neglected her essay for Snape while she was on this mission, but she was almost ready to try out her plans to guard herself in her bed. She was able to block sound from being heard outside the boundary of her spell, and she thought she could successfully cast wards against others' spells. She had been elated to find a spell to make her less noticeable. Not that she got noticed that much, anyway. But it made her able to escape the attention of those around her. Other people could be right there in the room and never cast a glance her way. She was missing something, though, she just knew it.

As she pondered this last piece of the puzzle she headed toward the kitchens. She had made a poultice for Snarky, one of the house-elves that had been kind to her, to ward away the Stinging Beezles that were known to populate potato patches. She was almost to the kitchen when she came across Snarky in the hallway. The elf was immobile, with a look of abject terror on her face, and she was literally quaking with fear.

"Snarky, what's wrong?" Luna asked worriedly.

"Oh, Miss Luna! Snarky was told to go to the Owlery to get a message, but Snarky is aff-f-fraid," the elf wailed.

"Snarky, don't be afraid. Is it the birds you're scared of?"

"Nnnnoooo"

"Well, are you afraid of the tower because it's high up? Are you afraid of heights?"

"Nnnnooo"

"What are you afraid of, then?"

This questioning proved to be too much for the panicked elf. She threw herself at Luna's legs, wailing miserably and loudly. Snarky gripped her so tightly that Luna was afraid the distraught elf would knock her off balance and they would both tumble to the ground.

"Snarky, Snarky, calm down. I'll help you. I'll go for you and get the message."

"Oh, noooo! Snarky cannot let Miss Luna go. Snarky doesn't want anything to h-h-happen to Miss Luna."

"Snarky, I'm not afraid. I can go to the Owlery and get the message. I can take care of it for you. And here...I made you that poultice to keep you safe from the Stinging Beezles. You haven't had any trouble with them, have you?"

"No, miss. Thank you, miss. Snarky is very lucky to know Miss Luna. Miss Luna is very brave. Snarky is not as brave as Dobby. Not as brave as Miss Luna. They are not scared. Snarky will learn to be brave, too. But t-t-tonight, please, miss, please take the message for Snarky."

"Of course, I told you I would. Here, take the poultice and rub it on your hands before you go to bed and it should ward off any pesky Beezles, okay?" Snarky took the proffered jar and nodded up at Luna, still unsettled. Luna smiled at the elf in reassurance, and in parting she called back, "Don't worry, it'll all be fine."

Luna turned around and skipped back along the corridor, now headed towards the Owlery. She did hope she would be able to take care of this whole business before curfew, but she had already given her word so she supposed she would just have to bear the consequences. It wasn't until she reached the top of the tower and saw the majestic white owl that was waiting impatiently with a scroll tied to its foot that she started to question this errand she had undertaken.

"Oh my, you are a handsome one, aren't you?" she cooed to the bird, who hooted at her as if annoyed at being kept waiting. "You arrived after mail call; your message must be very important," Luna said matter-of-factly. She untied the scroll and tried to hand the owl a treat, but the bird had already taken flight. Shrugging, Luna turned her attention to the scroll, and suddenly she understood what Snarky had been so upset about. She had said she wasn't as brave as Dobby, and Luna had thought nothing of it at the time, but Dobby had been the Malfoys' house-elf for many years before Harry Potter freed him. Dobby, she knew, had been treated very shabbily at the hands of the Malfoys. And this parchment was intended for none other than the young master Draco Malfoy. Luna laughed at herself and her predicament. She had assumed it was

some sort of post for the Headmaster or some professor, a person with enough authority to warrant such an unconventional late-night message delivery. She hadn't thought it would be another student. A Slytherin, no less. She didn't even know exactly where the Slytherin common room was. And besides that, she wasn't sure what to think about paying a late-night visit to Master Malfoy.

Before spending time with Draco she hadn't really cared what people's impressions of her were. After all, if her mother, the very foundation of her life, could be stolen from her without a moment's notice, she certainly wasn't concerned with trivialities like what Lavender Brown thought was appropriate for ladies' hairstyles or anything else. It had all seemed so inconsequential when life itself was such a fragile thing. But the tenuous beginnings of relationships were fragile too. At the time that the other students were forming friendships, Luna was content in her own company. If she hadn't been so cavalier about allowing distance to grow between her and the other students, she wouldn't be the butt of all of their jokes. If she had tried to blend in, she could have. She wouldn't have changed herself, she wouldn't have had to. But she could have reached out to her peers more instead of being content in her dreaming. But why was she questioning herself now? And whose standards was she trying to meet? Luna realized she was unsure that Draco would be willing to be involved with someone who didn't fit in. He was from a prestigious and unforgiving family and this thought had brought her to question herself.

Their time together in the empty classroom had been wonderful. He had done exactly the right things to make Luna feel that he truly cared about her. Still she wanted to remain cautious. She'd enjoyed her thoughts of Draco and feelings towards him very much. That was one reason she was a little afraid to trust him with that much of herself. She suffered from some recently developing and thoroughly unwelcome doubts. But did she doubt Draco or herself? Luna was a free spirit but she was also a pragmatist. She knew that feeling as she had about Draco carried inherent risk of disappointment. There were ways in which she could lose Draco's favor. She could lose him for one reason or another, and she knew already that she would be gutted by the loss. It was only natural to examine her situation and consider the possibilities.

Ravenclaw sensibility asserted itself, and she resolved that stagnating in indecision was useless. She would either trust him and accept him and let him close to her heart; or she wouldn't. Once she had decided, there'd be nothing man nor Merlin himself would be able to do to dissuade her. A decided Lovegood was not one to trifle with. Whether or not his family liked her, she was a force to be reckoned with. She would simply put paid to their misgivings or they could stuff it.

And now she, Looney Lovegood, would search out Draco in his own House in front of all of his friends and housemates. She would soon know whether he had been genuinely nice to her or there was some other reason for his attention. If he really wanted to be with her, it would be evident by how he responded to her appearing unbidden in front of everyone who knew him best. Luna smiled in anticipation; this could be a very interesting night yet.

Draco was sprawled in a chair in front of the fire in the Slytherin common room, staring unblinking into the fire. He wondered if Luna was curled up in a chair just like this in her own dorm. Luna. He had really enjoyed spending time with her. And snogging with her. He had meant it when he'd told her he wanted to spend time with her. But now he almost wished he'd never said it. He'd been a sloppy git after their stolen moments, thinking about how he could spend more time with her. Maybe he could ask her up to the Astronomy Tower to look at the stars. Maybe he could ask her to the Yule Ball, even though it was still months away.

He could picture her with her hair down, dressed elegantly and with her pale shoulders bare. She even knew how to dance, he remembered. He imagined them dancing together, her tiny hand in his. They would make a handsome couple. She would look stunning with him at his parents' New Year's Eve ball. In an instant his spine felt as if it was made of ice and his heart of smoke that drifted away from his chest and left him hollow. What was he thinking? He couldn't take Luna around his parents, around his father. He wouldn't put her through that. His father was unbearable to Draco...he couldn't imagine how cruel he would be to Luna. At the thought of gentle Luna feeling Lucius' wrath and Draco not being able to save her that pain, he knew he couldn't keep her. And if he couldn't keep her, he thought in despair, then it would be cruel of him to carry on with her. He couldn't have a casual relationship with her; she was inexperienced, and any attention he showed her she would take as true. He couldn't play it off and not let her see how he felt either. Even if he could stand to torture himself by spending time with her while knowing he couldn't stay with her, he couldn't stand to put Luna through that. He had to turn back into the meticulous and merciless Malfoy he'd been trained to be.

Luna skipped down a set of stairs on the way towards Professor Snape's classroom. She knew he was the Head of Slytherin, so it stood to reason he would have his classes near their dorm. She had Draco's scroll tucked safely inside her robes, but she planned to have it visible in her hand when Draco first saw her. Maybe then he wouldn't think she was deranged and following him like a love-struck loony bird. Looking ahead, she saw three girls with green emblems on their robes all huddled together and gossiping. Luna knew from experience that their conspiratorial glances and fervent whispering did not bode well for her safe passage. She concentrated on her expression, relaxing her face so as not to show any emotion and gazing off so she could see her path in her peripheral vision, knowing she would appear to be dreamy and oblivious. She would have to ask them for directions, she thought sadly. There was no one else around, and there wasn't likely to be. She couldn't roam the damp dungeons all night.

"Lost, Lovegood?" the middle girl asked. She was taller than Luna, with an overwhelming amount of freckles and two flat brown braids trailing behind her. Luna had the sudden image of the braids styled up on top of her head to look like demon's horns. It would certainly match the girl's nasty expression.

The giggle that escaped Luna's lips just made her seem more inane to the other girls. "Yes, I am. Can you tell me how to find the Slytherin common room?" Two of the girls laughed at her then. She was expecting it, of course.

"Sure," answered the girl on the left. She was the shortest of the girls and her black hair was cut short like a pixie cut. "Just keep going down this hallway and take the third right you come to."

"No, it's the second left, Mary. You'll have the poor girl stumbling straight into Professor Snape's private quarters," said the braided girl, with a smile like the cat who'd got the cream.

"Maybe he could tell me the way to the common room," Luna said in the most unconcerned of voices as she started to step forward again.

"You don't know what you're asking for. You shouldn't be here," said the third girl, who had been looking on silently with bit of a frown.

"Maybe not. But I'm here. There's nothing for it now," Luna answered. "But if you can't help me . . ." Luna fell silent, leaving a pregnant pause, and then continued on walking past the girls. Once she had passed them she heard, "Take your first right and it'll be seventeen paces down on your left. There's no portrait to mark it. But you won't be able to enter unless you're a Slytherin. I'm sure you won't find a Slytherin who will give you the password."

It was the very thing that had worried Luna, but it couldn't be helped. "Thank you," she called back over her shoulder. She didn't turn to look, but from the warning tone in which the instructions were given she thought it must be the blond girl on the right who had spoken; the same one who had warned her.

"Dungeons are treacherous places for Ravenclaws, you know," she heard one of them say in a sing-song voice. That had to be the sugary-sweet voice of the pixie called Mary. Luna ignored the jab and kept on.

There was a short flight of stairs down, probably six or seven steps, and then maybe ten yards to a hallway that turned off to the right. Just as she reached the first step there was a murmur behind her. She didn't hear the words; they seemed to come from more than one voice because they were spoken at the exact same moment. But one of them, she was sure, was *Glisseo*, and the other, she was sure, was *Descendo*.

A/N Snarky is so named in tribute to EchoLynn

Seventeen Paces

Chapter 10 of 17

Luna had set out to find Draco but after crossing paths with some meddlesome girls Luna finds herself in need of Draco's help.

The stone stairs were now a slippery slide, but Luna had already shifted her weight. She was propelled forward, but the solid step wasn't there anymore. Her feet flew out from under her and she fell onto her back and slid down the slope, her momentum dumping her on what would have been the bottom of the steps. The raucous laughter behind her was censured by a low, scolding voice.

"Oh, come on, Katie, that was funny." But the jabbering girls weren't Luna's most pressing concern any more. It was important to her not to show any reaction to their childish prank. And that would have been an easy task if she hadn't landed with her tender back on the sharp edge of the top stair, slid onto her side as she fell, and hit the floor level with all her weight on her right shoulder. She was pretty sure it was dislocated, but it was difficult to evaluate her situation as she was momentarily blinded by the crack she had taken to the side of her head. Deep breath. Adrenaline was working for her, but not for long. She had to get up and get around the corner, out of the girls' view. Then it could hurt.

With her good arm she pushed herself up to a sitting position, and then she warily climbed to her feet. She walked gingerly but calmly away from the girls, never looking back. She was wearing her school robes and the hallway was dim, so she figured they wouldn't see the way her arm hung oddly. She took one step and then the next, until she was around the corner. Knowing that if she stopped she wouldn't be able to start again, she trudged the seventeen paces to where the Slytherin common room was supposed to be. Once she was there she was out of a plan. And she was getting nauseated.

Luna put her left hand, shaking and ice-cold, to her head, and the cold felt good against her temple, helping her to focus. "*Draco, come out here,*" she thought, begging the fates, "*Please.*" Without a miracle she would still be there, gagging and dizzy, when the three girls made their way down, and that was not something she wanted to face. "*C'mon, Draco, leave the dorm... For any reason! Please be the one to find me. Please be the one to find me. Please be the one to find me.*" She hunched over, trying to breathe evenly by concentrating very hard on the floor in front of her. Her eyes grazed over the stones and she tried to focus on just one to bring her thoughts into order. The stone she chose was just in front of where the girls had said the portal would be and was etched with the Slytherin emblem. Luna concentrated on the stone in an effort to keep her wits about her.

She was just having the passing thought that they didn't need a painting when they had the very floor of the castle marking their dorm when long, pale fingers caught her under her chin. The unexpected touch was so gentle that she wondered if she'd really felt it. But a gentle pressure urged her face up to meet Draco's stormy eyes. He was scrutinizing her with his brow furrowed and his eyes tormented with...was it concern? Seeing him, she let out the breath that was all that had been holding her upright. The spinning in her head masked the spinning of her world as Draco picked her up, somehow knowing to approach from her uninjured side. Cradling her in his arms, he turned back to the dormitory portal. Luna concentrated on the feel of him to distract herself from her pain, trying to feel only his body heat, his breath on her cheek, and the smooth skin of his neck where she buried her face. He growled the password...it sounded like "nightshade"...and the rumble of his voice sent a shiver through her. He seemed to cradle her even more closely as he stepped through the portal into the Slytherin common room.

A lousy game of wizard chess had done nothing to assuage Draco's temper. He was too distracted to employ any strategy so he had played for bloodlust, capturing as many pieces as he could while he left himself undefended for his opponent to conquer. Blaise had asked what was wrong but Draco just returned his friend's gaze with a menacing look, and that effectively dropped the subject. He couldn't believe he was getting so worked up over a girl. A girl he hardly knew, he reminded himself. *But I do know her*, he thought. He knew who she was more than he knew anyone else at this school. And he was going to lose her before he even got the chance to call her his own.

In a huff he shot out of his chair, cursing the fates, and stormed down the stairs to his room. It was an oddly shaped room with three circular dens branching off from a central entrance, rather like the shape of a shamrock. This allowed a curtain to be drawn not just around the bed but around each of the individual circular areas. Slytherins valued their privacy, and none more than Malfoy. Still sulking, he yanked off his clothes and changed into black silk pajama pants. He threw himself onto his bed, stretching out his long frame, and tried to relax. Staring at the stone ceiling, he crossed his hands behind his head and kicked one ankle over the other. He stayed just like that for quite a long while before he was yanked from his dark thoughts.

There was no tickling in his mind. It wasn't like the invitation to share he had felt before, or any kind of exercise in Legilimency. But abruptly he felt Luna's presence. He was looking into a haze, searching for Luna in the foggy distance, straining to decipher what was happening. "Draco, come . . . please . . . please . . . the one . . . please be the one . . . please . . . find me." He couldn't hear all she was saying; she sounded so far away, and she was hurt. He knew it. Her arm...there was something wrong with her arm. And she was scared, she felt nearly defeated, but she hadn't given up. She had one little bit of hope left. His stomach pitched and he bolted upright, swinging his legs off the bed where he froze, trying to identify what she was seeing. Grey blocks. She was looking at a grey block wall. In a stone castle. *Not helpful, Luna*, he thought to himself. *Where are you? How can I find you?*

A rumble started to build in his chest and grew into a growl of frustration. And then, by Merlin's teeth, her eyes caught on a particular stone. The footstone of his House. She was trying to get to him! In a blur of black silk and lean muscle, he leaped across the room and up the stairs to the common room. In mere seconds, in just four great strides, he crossed to the door. Just outside stood Luna, as white as a porcelain teacup and just as fragile-looking. She was swaying and seemed to be trying very hard to stay upright.

He tipped her chin up as gently as he could so he could see into her eyes to get some indication of what was going on. "Draco," she whispered, as if he was the last good thing in the world and she was saved just by seeing him. No one had ever looked at him the way she did at that moment, with all her faith in her eyes, as if he were exactly what she'd been holding on for. In that moment she took away any choice he had in the matter of Luna Lovegood. He would do anything he could to be a good thing in her world. He could be good for her, and he would do his best to save her.

As gently as he could, he gathered her up in his arms and headed back to his room. No one would dare step in his way, not if they valued their lives. He crossed through the common room, his eyes meeting those of a startled Blaise, still sitting by the chess board. "No one comes near my room tonight, Blaise. Keep everyone out." Draco locked eyes with Blaise, who nodded, and Draco knew his request would be carried out without question. At least for the time being they would be left alone. He continued to his dorm room, Luna curled into him with her head on his shoulder. She nuzzled her face against his neck. Saints protect them, he was hers.

She didn't want to lose the feeling of Draco's heat against her as he laid her down on a comforter that was blessedly warm and smelled just the way Draco had smelled when he'd wrapped her in his arms and kissed her. She was in Draco's bed, she thought with the ghost of a smile. His bed? She was in Draco's bed, she thought again, with some distress. Her eyes opened to see him whipping closed great floor-to-ceiling drapes of deep green and black brocade, enclosing them in a circular room. He turned back to her and she saw his determined expression. And then her gaze fell below his face and her eyes became as round as the moon she was named after.

He was shirtless. Perfect skin covered more muscles than she'd known he had, and they were all tensed. His biceps and arms were clenched, drawing into relief the way his body was cut. He had strong shoulders, defined muscles on his chest, and his body tapered to a waist just below which some black satin pants that should be illegal were slung on his hips. She drew a ragged breath.

Draco chuckled, but even that was full of tension. "Bloody hell, Luna, I guess that's a good sign, if you're well enough to ogle me like that," he said, dragging his hand through his hair in a nervous habit that he had been forcibly taught not to do any more. This girl was driving him past his Malfoy training and into emotional responses that he had thought he had under strict control.

"What happened to you?"

"I fell," she said softly, meeting his gaze. She had never wanted to put that kind of pain and worry in his eyes. "Draco, I'm sorry I came to you unexpectedly, and in this condition. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Upset? Luna, I'm frantic. How badly are you hurt? Do we need to go to Madam Pomfrey?"

Luna noticed the way he said "we"; that meant he was in this with her, and her heart soared. "Don't worry so. I know how to fix this. I don't need Madam Pomfrey. But, Draco...I do need you. I'm going to need your help." She reached up towards him with her uninjured arm.

After a second's hesitation he stepped over and sat on the edge of the bed, folding her arm in his and covering her hand with his own. It was smaller than he remembered, and much colder. "You're freezing, Luna!"

"When I fell..." As soon as he started to interrupt she hushed him, saying, "I will explain every bit of it to you." When she saw that he would wait for her to continue, she repeated, "When I fell, I landed on my right shoulder. I'm fairly certain it's dislocated." Draco looked down towards her damaged arm, trying to think whether he could remember her moving it at all since he'd found her. Shit...he couldn't. "And I hit my head."

"Luna," he said in a warning tone.

"Please," she repeated. "It was a shock to fall, of course, but my adrenaline is wearing off now that I've found you..." Luna smiled gently... "so we need to set my arm right away if we're going to save me from some of the pain of fixing it."

"Some of the pain?" Draco asked, his eyebrows rising.

"It's dislocated, Draco. I need you to force my shoulder back into the socket. It sounds terrible, I know, but it won't be as bad as you think. It will be quick, very quick."

"As bad as I think? What about you? You're the one who'll be feeling it. Luna, you need a Healer and a potion for pain."

"No," she said, louder than she had intended. "No," she repeated more softly. Pulling her hand from his with a gentle smile, she reached up and stroked his face. "I don't need anything but you." Her caress did not erase Draco's worried frown. With no time to waste, Luna reached back behind her ear for her wand. She pointed it at the curtains and cast a charm. He watched her and did not interrupt but waited until she had finished.

"You silenced the room, Luna? Why?"

"So no one will hear me if I can't keep from crying out."

Healer Malfoy

Chapter 11 of 17

Draco learns about the events that brought Luna to him in such a vulnerable state.

Chapter 11

Healer Malfoy

Luna lay on her uninjured side with Draco straddling her waist. They had managed to gently peel off her robes and had discarded them on a nearby chair. He had a grip on her wrist and her elbow. Her arm was limp in his hands. "Do it quickly, Draco. Swing my arm up in one fast movement hard enough to force the shoulder back into place. Are you ready?" she asked.

"Am I ready to hurt you? No."

"Please, Draco," she said, and he could hear the pain and weariness in her voice. "You must understand how I feel." He did, and it pained him so he released a defeated breath.

"On the count of three, then?" he asked.

"Uh, I guess so . . ." she meant to say, but he had already counted to two, so all she managed to get out was, "Uh, I gue..." before he yanked her arm up towards her head. In that moment Luna was blinded by an abrupt assault on her shoulder joint that felt rather like the impact of an ice pick. Because her voice was already in use when it happened, her words dissolved but the sound didn't stop and she cried out.

"Luna, are you okay?"

She couldn't speak yet, but she nodded and tried to keep breathing. After a moment she tried to move her arm and was delighted to find that she could. "You did it!" she cheered, still breathing harder than normal.

Draco looked down at her and managed valiantly to draw his face up in a shaky imitation of his customary sneer. "You see? I'm almost a Healer."

"That's a lucky thing for me, Healer Malfoy, because I'm going to need a little more help from you. This next thing is gonna be a little harder for me to ask. I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"You need me to do something that's going to make me more uncomfortable than listening to you scream and knowing you felt that pain from my hands? Bloody hell, Luna," he said, running those same guilty hands through his hair.

"I was already in pain, Draco. You ended it. And you saved me a great deal of humiliation." Draco knew how important it was to him to keep his shame or moments of weakness private. He had gone to great lengths to keep his humiliations to himself and had largely succeeded. That is, until he'd unintentionally shared them with Luna. "Draco, you have done so much for me already tonight. You don't have to do this, but . . . remember you told me my hand was cold?" He nodded. "It's all of me. My body is confused from the shock and it's working so hard to figure out what's broken that it's forgetting to keep me warm. It's like what you said in the Astronomy Tower...that sometimes your body does things your mind is trying to tell it not to." Draco thought he must have failed to express what he had meant in the tower that day, but that was

an explanation for another time. "Will you lie down with me to keep me warm? I'm so cold."

"Ah, so you do want to 'play Healer,'" he teased with a mischievous glint in his eye. If that was all she was asking of him, that he get close enough to hold her, then he was a lucky man.

He stood and looked down at her, trying to figure out how to get the blankets out from under her so he could cover her up. Sensing his dilemma, she rose gingerly, swinging her feet off the bed, and grabbing his arms for support, she stood. She reassured him that she would be okay so he would release her long enough to pull down the covers. Shakily she sat and smiled crookedly at him. "I'm quite the mess tonight, aren't I?" she asked.

"Yes," he said in almost a whisper, but his eyes were burning when he looked at her.

A violent shiver racked her then and her gaze was pulled from his as she closed her eyes against it. Kicking off her shoes, she turned to slip into the bed. He pulled the duvet up around her, covering all the way to her poor injured shoulder, and then went round to the other side of the bed. He lay on top of the covers; thinking that even with his bawdy teasing Luna would probably be uncomfortable tucked into his bed with him. She was an innocent, he was sure of it. He knew she had just asked him to lie with her because she had needed to snuggle under the blankets for warmth. He lay alongside her, perched precariously on the edge of the bed. She was wrapped in the cocoon he had made for her but she continued to shiver.

"I wish I had some warmed butterbeer here for you now," he said softly, so close to her ear that she could feel his breath.

"Draco," she called, her teeth chattering, and he could hear that she was in pain. She looked at him and it was clear she was in agony. Her voice quavered terribly as she faced him to say, "It hurts me to shiver." Her words were a little hard to make out through the tremors. "I wouldn't want to make you feel uneasy, and I would repay your kindness with only discretion. But, Draco, I can't share your body heat through the bed clothes. Could you come beneath the blankets to heat up this bed for me? Because I can't right now."

It was the oddest invitation to get into bed with a woman that he could imagine. He smiled to himself to hear that through all her pain she had been worried about his sense of propriety. Apparently she was worried that he would feel his virtue would be besmirched. It would have been laughable if the situation weren't so serious. Certainly it could bolster his reputation if people knew Luna had shared his bed, even if nothing happened. People's imaginations would do the rest, and he would be regarded as something of a playboy. The thought made his stomach turn. He would never use Luna for that; it was monstrous. But now it might be unavoidable. How many people had seen him carry her in here? That was a problem of epic proportion that he was going to have to figure out. And quickly.

His thoughts raced as he rolled off the bed and lifted the covers to slip under them. Just the breeze that assaulted her from the unintentional fanning of the blankets had her gasping from the cold. He climbed in and found that his bed was just not intended for two people. "Budge up, birdie," he said. The best she could do was to roll onto her left side so he could lie behind her and press the length of his body up against her. "Merlin's teeth," he cursed to himself. This was going to be torture, but he'd endure the discomfort if it would take the pain out of her voice and help her.

He brought his left arm up and she lifted her head so he could slide his arm underneath to cradle her. He reached his other hand gingerly and blindly towards her under the covers, hoping he would find her waist so he could position himself next to her. He wrapped his arm around her; his outstretched hand spanned almost her entire belly and he gently scooted her back towards him. Once she got close to him she instinctively curled her body into his, grinding her bottom exactly against his groin. He let out a sound that an animal might make, but he was pretty sure it wasn't a sound that should've come from a man; especially a man who was supposed to be caring for a sick girl. She reached her legs back to trap one of his between her ankles and her feet were like ice. He sucked in a sudden breath and he didn't know if it was the closeness or the cold that caused it.

"I'm sorry." She shivered. "Am I too cold?"

"No, its okay, Luna. Is this better?"

"Mm-hmm," was all she replied. Carefully, so as not to inadvertently touch her, he moved his hand to the area between her collarbones. This was hardly a suggestive place, and he tucked his arm around her, his elbow resting just at her waist. She was a tiny thing, he thought as he folded her into his body, wrapping her in his heat. She tried to curl into him even more, like a cat stretching its back, to take as much of his heat as she could; but when she pushed against him and tried to curve her back she whimpered and the breath went out of her. He froze, not knowing what had happened, but after a moment she gingerly continued easing back into him, more gently than before, so that when she relaxed she was as close as it was possible to be. His awkward feeling at wanting to warm her but not touch her inappropriately was eased when she wrapped her right arm around his where he held her, making it impossible for him to let her go.

It was just a few minutes later that the chills subsided, but neither of them moved. Soon Draco felt her breathing slow and become rhythmic. She must be exhausted. She probably hadn't had a decent night's sleep in ages. He didn't want to wake her. He didn't want to put her through another ordeal of interrogation either, but he had to know what had happened. He couldn't just let her sleep through the night and hope they'd both wake up tomorrow with no repercussions to face. She had been very open with him; surely she wouldn't hide anything from him. He didn't want to betray her trust or violate her, but he was confident that she would want to share the information with him. The problem was that he needed to know *now*, and he thought he knew a way to find out without waking her up to ask her. She could show him, even while she slept. He could try to reach her memory and find out how she had come to be on his doorstep, about to collapse in agonizing pain.

She had said she'd fallen, but didn't say where. If she had come to him she had to have passed through the dungeons. He pictured the entrance to the dungeon tunnels and concentrated on the girl pressed furiously against him as if she feared she would be carried away if she allowed the slightest bit of space between them. He hadn't written his essay for Snape yet, so he hoped he wasn't breaking any wizarding laws on Legilimency as he did this, but it was too late now.

Draco saw the tunnel entrance but it seemed taller than usual. He felt like a fool when he realized it was because Luna was shorter than he was. And everything was bouncing. Was she skipping? Oh, good grief. And she was thinking about him. She was thinking HE might be ashamed of her, of being seen talking to her. She had something to give him and she was afraid he would be unkind. Then the bouncing stopped. He saw three figures ahead. He felt her dread.

What was he doing? What was he about to see? He hoped it was something he could live with afterwards, because he was about to watch it without her consent. He saw Katie, the uptight sixth year he avoided when at all possible; Liselle, the mean-spirited one; and Mary, the one with the silly, spiky hair. Luna knew she needed help, and she thought she probably wouldn't get it, but she had to ask because she had to find him. This was entirely his fault, then...how reassuring. The girls were unkind, but Katie had finally given Luna the information she had asked for. Draco was ready to dismiss the nasty trio as rude but irrelevant when he heard the curses.

Luna had known in that very instant that something was about to go wrong, but she was powerless to stop it. He felt her literally hovering in midair for a moment before the crash, when the back of her rib cage had landed on the top stair. That was why she had winced a few moments ago when she pressed her back against him. The wind had gone out of her as she slid down, hitting the ground where there was a sledgehammer waiting to bash her shoulder in. Luna had been glad she was out of breath; it was all that had saved her from yelping.

Draco lay there for a moment, stunned...not only by what he had seen but also by the fact that he had been able to extract the memory from Luna and that he had shared Luna's sensations rather than just observing them. In their encounters of mental sharing, he was privy to her memories as well as her thoughts and feelings, and she seemed to have the same privilege with him. Perhaps there was more to their connection than just the bridge of Legilimency. Could it be that they had some other kind of a link? And how had she mentally called out to him tonight when she had needed him? She had called to him because she had been desperate, this he knew, but it would have to have been powerful wandless magic to reach him.

It was a good thing that her magic was strong because she seemed so small and vulnerable in his arms. Would he be able to protect her or would he be forever trying to put her back together after she had been hurt? He held her more closely at the thought that left him aching. He was trapped in a maze of uncertainty; every path of thought led him to another unanswerable question. But his mind focused on a most pressing revelation. Luna's memory had revealed her head smacking into the ground just above the right brow. That was going to bruise, he thought. That was probably going to cause a concussion, he thought next. Bloody hell.

Silently

Chapter 12 of 17

Draco finds a way to communicate with Luna.

"Luna," she heard a deep voice calling softly. "I need you to wake up for me." She whimpered in disappointment; it would be a terrible thing for this feeling to end. She was reveling in the contentment that she felt in his arms. She was warm, and she wasn't often warm in this drafty castle. And she felt safe; she rarely felt that, either.

"Luna, are you with me? There's no time for a lie-in," she heard him scold teasingly.

"Mmmmm," she hummed sleepily.

"I know you've only been asleep for about an hour, but I need you to wake up."

"An hour?" Panic started to clear the fog of sleep from her head. "Crumbs! You'll get in trouble! It's after curfew," she managed to mumble.

She felt him chuckle. "Curfew is about the least of our worries. You more than likely have a concussion, for starters, so you need to be woken every couple hours to make sure your brain hasn't gone wonky on us. I'd hate for you to forget who I am and wake in a panic, thinking you're wrapped in the arms of an evil assailant, and try to hex me. Plus," he continued, trying to keep his tone light, "even though your housemates probably aren't too worked up about your absence, since they never know where you are in the first place, my housemates are probably a bit curious about me carrying a girl into my bedchamber tonight. And I really don't want you reappearing from my care with a nasty bruise on the side of your head. Then they might think I was an evil assailant and try to hex me."

Luna tried to turn towards him and found it impossible since she was plastered against him. She leaned away and realized that she was damp with sweat. She found a way to wiggle slowly and painstakingly over so she was facing him, but the bed hadn't gotten any bigger, so she was rather pressed up against him again. "I'm not cold anymore," she said, pushing the covers down to their waists. Draco had remained lying exactly as he had been, so she resumed her position cradled on his arm with her head tucked under his chin. "Thank you," she mumbled sleepily into his chest, her breaths tickling him. She had wrapped her sore arm in front of her, across her waist, and it was pinned between them, but she hadn't found a place to rest her other arm, so she slung it across him. When her hand made contact with his bare skin, the intimacy of feeling his bare skin beneath her hand startled her. She froze in place, and her breath left her in a rush. "Draco, oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"You're okay. Sshhh, settle down." He pulled her to him with his free arm, and she relaxed. She lay alongside him but not pressed flush against him; it seemed she didn't need all his heat anymore. It was a relief since he felt like he was about to succumb to heat stroke. He was able to roll onto his back and keep her tucked against him. The effect of this transition was that her hand dragged along his body from his back, where it had lain lightly across his rib cage, to rest on his chest as he turned. He rested his hand on her arm, drawing little petting designs on the back of her hand as they lay there.

"Luna? What do we want to do about people seeing me bring you in here?"

"Well, are you sure they knew it was me?" she asked reasonably.

"No, not necessarily. Blaise knows you're here, but not who you are. But Kate, Liselle, and Mary know who you are even if they don't know yet that you're still here. But soon enough people will get to talking and figure it out. Slytherins are great ones for gossip."

"I see. And how did . . . you know about those girls?" She had woken to find Draco in the same position in which he had laid down next to her. He hadn't left her, so how did he now know about the three girls?

"You dream pretty loud, birdie," he lied softly.

She sighed. "Well, you've saved me the indignity of explaining myself out loud, I suppose. What else did you see in my dreams?"

"Uh, not much." In an effort to obscure his uninvited invasion, he had already allowed her to think she was responsible for him knowing her memories. He hoped to redeem himself by at least admitting the truth about all that he had discovered. He launched into the awkward part of the conversation instead of hedging around it as he was oh-so-tempted to do. "I know you were coming to me as a sort of test to see how I would receive you." He nearly choked on the words because he feared he probably would have handled the situation poorly.

"I'm sorry if that hurt you. I don't mean to doubt you. That's not it, exactly; I don't doubt you and who you are. I've seen inside you. But I've never felt this way before, and I want to know before it gets away from me that you do want me to...fall for you." She smiled gently. "It feels like nothing else in the world matters when I'm with you. But I don't want to be something you're ashamed of in front of other people. So, since I had to come find you anyway, I thought I might find the answer to my questions."

"Why did you have to find me?" he asked evenly.

"Oh, no!" she shouted. "I forgot all about it. You got an owl!"

"An owl? This late at night?"

"It did seem strange. And the elves were afraid to bring it to you, so I said I would. Well, I didn't know it was for you when I said I would do it. She just looked so afraid, and I thought what could be the big deal about delivering an owl post, for goodness' sake?"

"Luna?"

"Yes?"

"What did the owl bring?"

"Oh, here. It's in my robes." Slowly, she got up and retrieved the scroll from her robes for him. As if to give him privacy, she remained standing and tried to move around a bit, testing her body for soreness.

Draco looked grave when he saw the seal on the scroll. He sat up in bed and held it silently, as if lost in thought. Rather than opening the scroll, he set it aside and looked up at Luna with the utmost seriousness.

With a pensive expression he got up and walked over to face her, his eyes begging her to understand what even he himself couldn't quite sort out. "Luna, I love the way you're honest with me. But I'm just not as transparent. You know I've spent my whole life keeping my feelings to myself."

"It's okay, Draco. Just because I'm ready to ask the question doesn't mean you're ready to answer it. I'll wait for you to figure out how you feel. No pressure." Her serenity was beguiling as she placed her hand gently on his chest.

Draco placed his hand over hers and breathed in as much air as his lungs could hold. Turning his head to the side, he closed his eyes and let all the air rush out of him, hoping it would carry his inhibitions away with it. "Luna . . . this is how I feel." He placed his fingers on her forehead as lightly as snowflakes falling and traced the side of her upturned face until he cupped her chin. He leaned slowly towards her, and her breath caught in her chest. She stilled, waiting, enchanted by the sight of him moving towards her. His eyes offered a confession that words could not express. Draco saw her, he truly saw her, and he wanted her. He was tormented by her, and afraid of her, and afraid of himself and that he might frighten her away. He was trying so hard to do this the right way, but he was as unsure as she about what that way was.

Luna's mind reeled until he caught her lips with his. He kissed her chastely, but so intimately that Luna thought she might understand the reason people had invented kissing. It was a portal into the other person. It was just as telling as the thoughts they had shared, but silent and profoundly more emotional. His kisses strayed to the corner of her mouth, to her jawbone, cheek bone, and eyelids that remained closed under the shower of his kisses. He kissed the tip of her nose. His hands cupped her face and he returned his mouth to hers. Luna was basking in the gentle adoration he had just shown her.

When he kissed her again, he offered more than his compliments; he offered his need for her. He pressed his lips to hers more urgently. Only seconds passed before he was advancing into the delicate delights of her deepened kiss. Startled, she welcomed him, trying to discern what he meant to do. He meant to possess her. He meant to take all she would offer him. He was hungry for her. He devoured the taste of her as if he were committing it to memory, as if she were precious to him. He moved his tongue against hers in an invitation as old as time. He was making himself vulnerable to her in the only way he knew how. He was begging her to understand and to accept him.

Luna glowed and tingled and kissed him back. Slowly withdrawing, Draco returned to the gentle kisses he had first offered her. When he straightened, she melted into him, leaning against his chest where he had cradled her in her sleep. He pressed his cheek down on the top of her head. She kissed his skin just once, nipping gently at him before she stilled. Minutes later he released her and stepped back. He had composed his face back into the Malfoy that was imperious and unreachable. He faced her, waiting for rejection. How dizzying it was to her that she'd come to find out whether *he* wanted *her*, only to confront his painful need for her to accept him.

Her eyes held more silver magic than unicorn's blood. She nodded minutely and reached for his hand. When she slipped her hand into his, Draco's eyes showed that his mind was racing to interpret her actions. When he hit on the meaning of it, he looked surprised at first. He smiled a crooked smile, much like his smirk but full of happiness instead of contempt. He nodded back. If they could manage this communication without words, he wouldn't be the one to break the silence. The late-night scroll was the farthest thing from their minds.

Mister Malfoy

Chapter 13 of 17

Professor Snape takes Draco on a trip that he is unprepared for.

Draco had assured Luna that he could deliver her to the hallway just down from the Ravenclaw dorms. They would have to walk boldly through the Slytherin common room and the dungeon hallways first, though, so he suggested that they do it quickly and with their school robes on, both with green emblems so they would draw less attention. Luna managed the transformation neatly, and cloaking themselves in their school robes for some anonymity, Draco led her through the blessedly quiet common room and out into the corridors.

It wasn't long before they reached an alcove with a rather frightening sculpture of writhing snakes on display. Draco tapped a brick somewhere to the left of it with his wand, and they ducked into the entrance that revealed itself.

True to his word, Draco delivered Luna discreetly just a few yards away and around a corner from her dorm, and after a quick but desperate kiss she slipped back into her dorm unnoticed. Draco found himself alone and dizzy with the events of the previous night. He was burdened heavily with the knowledge that there were far-reaching implications for taking risks and trusting people. In fact, those were the two things he generally avoided; but maybe . . . just maybe, this would all work out. There were only a few thousand things that could go wrong; perhaps they could be prevented. If he were to simply identify them he could...what? What could he do, exactly? Besides keep falling for Luna and trying to stay a half a step ahead of disaster. No pressure.

"Mister Malfoy, approach my desk," the Potions professor hissed. Class had ended, and Draco had started towards the door to freedom and to Luna. Frustrated, he nodded in acknowledgement and complied. He had made it all day so far without incident. This was his last class, and he had thought he was scot-free. Was it possible that Snape had found out something about Luna being in Draco's room last night? He tried to prepare himself for that eventuality.

The key was to think fast and react slowly. For the love of Merlin, he hoped he could. He felt helpless, like a man skiing down a hill that is far beyond his skill level pinning his hopes on what limited experience he has, rumors he's heard about how to face the dangers, guts, and hopefully luck. There isn't an option to slow down; gravity pulls as it will. And Severus Snape was a wizarding force on the same plane as gravity. He was merciless, constant, and unstoppable. Draco also knew him as an esteemed servant of the Dark Lord, which made him all the more ominous and amplified the danger. Beyond being Draco's professor, his Head of House, and his father's friend, Snape was also the highly valued right hand of the terror of the wizarding world. *Deep breaths*, Draco reminded himself as the remainder of the students filed out. Rather than risking appearing to stall, he initiated the conversation.

"Professor, you wish to speak with me?" He was cool and collected.

Severus scowled at the boy and produced his wand, casting a Muffliato charm on the empty room and spewing quick words at Draco. "As you know, I am taking you to your father. There is no time to waste."

Draco raised an eyebrow. What kind of test was this?

"Sir?"

"You received an owl post last night, did you not?" the professor inquired coolly.

The post! He hadn't read it. It bore his father's seal, and Draco had little desire to correspond with the man. Besides, he had been delightfully distracted all night by the presence of a little birdie. Snape glided past Draco, his robes blurring his movements so that he appeared to be carried out of the room by the wake that trailed behind him. He carried on without a backward glance to see if Draco followed, snarling in a low voice, "I will not endanger myself for those from whom I cannot expect immediate

compliance, Malfoy. My time is valuable."

Draco wordlessly followed Snape down the endless winding corridors of the dungeons until even he was rather lost. The Professor halted abruptly, and turned to face a portrait. He cast an incantation softly, and an opening was revealed. Draco followed Snape through the portrait hole and found the professor waiting for him impatiently. Snape closed the entrance with the same incantation and turned towards the barren stone room.

Draco wanted to ask so many questions, but he maintained the behavior he knew would best serve him, which was silent obedience. He could find out what he needed to know along the way, surreptitiously. He had also learned that by not asking specific questions he left open the opportunity to glean even more knowledge. People could be careless with their words and sometimes revealed more voluntarily than under interrogation.

In a few brisk strides across the room the pair reached a fireplace. Without hesitation, Professor Snape simultaneously grabbed a handful of Floo powder and Draco's elbow and dragged Draco into the fireplace. "Hog's Head," the professor snarled, and then the green flames enveloped them. Within moments, they had been transported and were immediately assaulted with the sour, acrid smell of a pub long in operation. The stench of old smoke clouded the stale air, and the room's few occupants were cloaked and seemed to hunch in the shadows, as though they were trying to become part of the darkness itself.

Draco looked wildly around him, like prey realizing it was caught in a trap. He didn't know whether it was panic or the stench itself that coated his mouth with a sour flavor. Forcing himself to appear calm, he scanned the room. It was dingy, dark, and foul. It made Draco uneasy and a little dizzy. As oppressive suffocation was descending on him, he spotted his father sitting across the room, undisguised and appallingly disheveled.

"Quickly, Lucius," were Snape's only words when they joined Lucius at his table. Draco had been secreted out of the castle to meet his father at a pub? The man looked undone. Lucius sat with a liquor glass clenched in his fist, an uncharacteristic accumulation of blond whiskers on his normally clean-shaven face, his garments askew. His drunken father had sent for him? Kidnapped him from school? Oh, sometimes he hated having a Death Eater father! After all the times he had said "My father will hear about this" and his father had done bugger-all to help him. Now, when he wanted nothing to do with the bloody bastard, Lucius proved that he could have arranged whatever he needed to all along and had not.

"Draco!" As soon as he was seated Lucius bellowed in a sanctimonious voice, which was just slightly slurred, "I was a Seeker, and I led my House to victory. Your failure is unacceptable; must I explain to you how the game is played?" He punctuated his taunt by slamming his glass down on the table. The dressing-down evoked a snicker from at least one of the shapeless cloaks stationed around the room.

Lucius wobbled in his seat and then seemed to tip sideways, leaning in towards Draco, and he began to whisper a torrent of panic. "The Dark Lord is livid. The prophecy, the disaster at the Ministry...there's not much time for me. He will extract punishment. The Malfoy honor must not perish due to my failing." Lucius choked on the word.

His fierce whispering and whatever he had to say was important enough for him to risk himself, his oldest friend Snape, and his son...hell, everything. "What must I do, father?" Draco asked in hushed tones.

"You are the Malfoy heir and now the keeper of the Manor. It dates back to the magic of Merlin, and it has power." Lucius reached for his son's hand and when Draco grasped it, it was damp and clammy. "There are no choices without great price. For your life and your mother's a price is demanded that I have paid for a long time, but now . . . my life is forfeit." Mute, confused, and panicked, Draco felt his hand being handled roughly, and his finger...what was being thrust upon him? "Save our name, and take care of your mother."

"Enough, Lucius; time is short," came Snape's hiss.

Lucius looked at his son appraisingly for a long moment then said, "You are the head of the family now. Now only you have the power to protect what is important to us." Draco's mind was reeling.

His father had been whispering furtively to him, and without breaking eye contact, he abruptly resumed a normal volume and a pronounced slur. "Draco, I expect a good game from you; lead Slytherin to the House Cup this year. I will not tolerate failure."

"Yes, Father," Draco responded, playing along with the ruse, bewildered but scrambling to disguise the fact.

"Do not fail me again, Draco," and with this, Lucius rose unsteadily. "Take him away, then, Severus," he slurred. And under his breath, as clear and sober as could be, he whispered "Thank you" before resuming his act and walking unsteadily towards the loo.

"Come" Snape barked, but just as they reached the fireplace they had entered through Draco heard, "Severus, come have a drink with us!" ring out behind them. Snape froze; with precise and liquid movements he turned and faced a sneering brute Draco did not know.

"Without the slightest regret I must decline. I have responsibilities that will not allow it."

"Come, now. Certainly you won't refuse a drink in the name of the Dark Lord's victory."

"I would toast the Dark Lord, but I would refuse the drink due to my station, and moreover because I would not drink anything you handed me. I have known you too long for that."

The man chuckled darkly at that and nodded. "You are wise enough in that." His eyes narrowed, and he glanced sideways at Draco before returning his gaze to Severus. "I worry for the wisdom of some of your other . . . alliances."

"I hardly think it is within the scope of your reasoning to evaluate my actions, as they seem to be acceptable to the Dark Lord," Snape hissed.

"You always did get riled up too easily. I'm sure you think it important to take the House Cup. It must be trying to lose a children's game to half-bloods and blood traitors. The boy here and his family's money might be what you need to redeem your House. But then again, if he needs instruction from that drunken sot Lucius to take a game, you might find yourself in a predicament."

"Come, Mister Malfoy." Snape bade Draco to precede him into the hearth. Walking between the stranger's cruel grin and the cold gaze of his professor locked on each other, Draco stepped into the cinders of the empty fire grate, and with a sudden crushing grip on his arm and a green flare, he was back in Hogwarts.

Professor Snape brushed the Floo powder from his robes. "Your father persuaded me that he needed to speak to you in person most urgently. He knew he would be followed, so he had no need to disguise himself, but he attempted the guise of drunkenness. He will not return to the Manor, but you must go there as soon as possible to seal yourself to the enchantments, to keep the Unplottable spell intact and to ensure the rights of family ownership are passed to you. Missing the evening meal would raise suspicion, so attend it as usual and eat in the Great Hall as always. Slip away immediately after. Tell no one and do not be seen. Meet me in my classroom. I needn't tell you this ordeal carries a great deal of risk for both of us. I do not appreciate its being thrust upon me nor the timing with which it has arisen, but I am repaying a longstanding debt."

"Sir?"

Snape remained silent but did not quit the room; Draco had to assume he was free to ask at least one thing.

"If my father is correct, why should I or my mother be any safer from the Dark Lord's retribution?"

"Your father just gave you the answer to that question."

"All he gave me was a madman's tirade and his signet ring."

Snape looked at Draco like he was daft. "It appears there is much you do not understand. Pray you learn quickly enough to survive." And with that he strode away.

Draco followed him out of the empty room, which Snape resealed with an incantation. After that, Draco trailed farther and farther behind, stumbling dumbstruck through endless stone corridors. Snape apparently felt no compunctions about keeping track of his pupil now that their distasteful mission had been concluded. Draco tried to force his legs to carry him onward but found himself standing as still as a suit of armor, looking down at the ring on his hand. It had always seemed so big to him. He remembered seeing it on his father's hand when Draco was a child. It seemed to stand out as something larger than life, regal and honorable. It had represented what Draco had hoped to be, a Malfoy man, his father's son. He had so wanted to make his father proud.

But as the years passed, his father had withdrawn from Draco and faded from a youthful, vibrant man to a brittle, heartless, scheming bastard. If the Dark Lord fed from his Death Eaters' life force, it would be no surprise to Draco. His father had aged before his eyes since he had taken up his Dark enterprises again. And he had turned cruel. The ring that had once been a symbol of Draco's proud future was now an anchor tying him to his dark family travesty.

What had happened to turn his father into the unmitigated bastard he had become? Draco hadn't cared before; he had just hated him for it. But now that his father's ring weighed heavy on his finger, Draco had to figure out how to be the head of his family without turning into the shadow of his father. He had to take on this responsibility for his mother's sake, for the sake of their family name and fortune; certainly he would have to face the consequences of his father's tie to the Dark Lord. And he had to do it all without turning into something that Luna would hate the way Draco hated his father.

All Sorted Out

Chapter 14 of 17

A rare occurrence brings Luna under a new kind of scrutiny.

Luna entered the Great Hall only to encounter the two manky Slytherin girls who had caused her all the trouble the night before. Although without them, she realized, she wouldn't have spent the night wrapped in Draco's arms. She smiled dreamily at the thought. The girls, however, had no intention of letting her pass without comment.

"Oi, Looney, good to see you found your way to the Great Hall," the pixie-looking girl said mockingly.

"Hope you didn't have any trouble with the stairs on your way," the freckled girl chimed in, and they both broke into laughter. Luna acted as if she hadn't heard them and tried to go around them, but they moved to block her way. Trapped, Luna wondered why ever Blaise Zabini was walking over with his eyes glued on her. Was he going to call her out for sneaking into Draco's room? Did he know? Had Draco let on to him? Blaise was his roommate, after all, but his next words took her entirely by surprise.

"Mary, Liselle, good eye for welcoming Luna. Can I walk you over to the Slytherin table, Luna?" he asked, dead serious. Luna blinked at him in surprise.

"What? Loony Lovegood sit with us?" Mary shrieked.

"Watch yourself, Mary. Slytherins stick together. You know that's the way we do things." To all three girls' utter amazement, Blaise pointed to Luna's robes and the emblem that was still as green as dragon scales and emblazoned with Salazar Slytherin's slithering snake. Luna was gobstruck, but by the count of three, she had recovered and smiled a heartbreaker of a smile at Blaise.

"Thank you. I do always appreciate the kindness of being pointed in the right direction." She and Blaise swept away from the two girls, and he guided her right over to the Slytherin table and directed her to sit on his right. On his left was the hunched-over tall frame of a light-haired boy Luna knew very well.

Draco was slumped with his head in his hands when the other two sat down. With a sideways glance he noticed Blaise and grunted at him in greeting. "Blaise. Pansy," Draco muttered in greeting without really looking at them.

"Nah. Not Pansy. I always did have a thing for blondes, you know," Blaise said with a grin. "If I'm not mistaken, you do as well, aye, mate?"

Draco grunted again in response as he took a sip of his drink, and at that moment he looked down past Blaise and into the eyes of Luna Lovegood. His face went slack with surprise, and the pumpkin juice went down his throat in just the wrong way so that he choked. Badly. Blaise thumped him on the back, bringing tears to Draco's eyes. Once his coughing subsided, he looked again at Luna and saw her smiling sweetly at him, starry eyed and innocent as could be.

Luna thought Professor Snape had looked chilling when she was late for his class, but that was nothing compared to how he looked when he found her at the Slytherin table. He was icy as a hailstorm and just as dangerous. He was so upset that even his pale-as-parchment complexion wasn't dead white for a moment as he stormed over to confront her. Luna politely inquired whether the furious Professor had eaten any of the potatoes, entirely out of concern since the Stinging Beezles in this year's potato crop tended to make people flush. At this Draco actually expelled pumpkin juice through his nose, which drew the attention of his furious Head of House. Draco tried to appear contrite, but holding his laughter in had the effect of making him look a tad seasick. Luna thoughtfully inquired about his digestion as well. While the students within hearing distance of the exchange tried to contain their snickers, Professor Snape officially surpassed livid, and Headmaster Dumbledore had to step in.

"Really, Severus, there is an easy way to resolve this. Minerva, will you please fetch the Sorting Hat from my office?" The Great Hall erupted into excited chatter. No one could remember hearing about a time when the Sorting Hat had been brought out except when first years came to Hogwarts. Quickly enough Professor McGonagall arrived with the Sorting Hat, which was grumbling testily about being disturbed. Grumbling even more ferociously was Professor Snape, who led Luna up to the front of the Great Hall with a very firm grip on her upper arm.

Draco looked on with concern; Snape's rough grip on Luna had him bristling. It was an emotion he was not entirely familiar with, and he didn't care for it in the least. Luna was jostled alongside Professor Snape up to a chair that had been hurriedly dragged into place for what was to follow. Once Snape released his vise-like grip on her arm, Luna turned and sat down unconcernedly. She had a slightly dazed look but wore her characteristic contented smile.

A worried-looking Professor McGonagall looked as though she wanted to say something to Luna, but she held her thoughts to herself as she approached Luna with the Hat in her hands. Just before Professor McGonagall set it on Luna's head, Draco was sure he saw Luna glance over at him and wink knowingly. Oh, yeah, that spacey look of hers hid a girl who knew what she was doing. If only he knew what she was doing!

The Hat took to song at that moment with a short introduction:

I'm never wrong, this much is fact,

Not often am I doubted;

Rarely has it come to pass

A student's House was flouted.

I do not take it lightly when

My decision has been questioned.

Every student's home I choose

With the very best intentions.

Who calls me here to denounce

My careful cogitation?

Who dares demand this appeal

Of my earnest consideration?

In the darkness with the Hat covering her eyes, Luna listened to its deliberations. She was as surprised as anyone that Dumbledore had brought out the Sorting Hat. This had all spiraled out of control. She had apparently gone the entire day without a single person noticing the altered emblem on her robes until Blaise had spotted her.

Now she listened in earnest to hear what the wise old Hat had to say. She felt a bit remorseful for all the disruption she was causing and all the unwanted attention she was garnering, but it was a small price to pay to protect Draco from scrutiny over their night together.

"Isn't this interesting?" the Hat drawled. "I had not thought you would be the student to return and challenge my decision." While Luna wondered if she should respond and reassure the Hat that she hadn't meant to offend it, it continued, saying, "It is good that you have called for my attention. When you first came to Hogwarts, it was a difficult decision to place you. Every student has characteristics of more than one House, and it is my difficult task to select the House that will best suit them. I knew that Ravenclaw would nurture your intelligence and wit. But it seems you have honed your savvy as well in order to achieve your purposes. You remain as bright as any Ravenclaw, but your cunning is your crowning attribute. I have decided that you will find a happy future in"

The Great Hall had fallen silent as everyone waited for the Hat's announcement. They hadn't long to wait before it echoed through the room. "Slytherin!" The bright light, when the Hat was swept off her head, made Luna blink. The entire Slytherin table was cheering, and all the other tables sat in stunned silence. Snape was glaring at her shrewdly with his arms crossed over his chest. After the briefest moment, he turned on his heel and swept from the room, his robes billowing ominously behind him.

The Ravenclaws seemed unfazed by the Sorting Hat's pronouncement. Luna wasn't close to any of them, in any case. At the Gryffindor table, Ginny Weasley looked as if she'd had the wind knocked out of her. Hermione, who sat beside her, looked repulsed, and across from her, Ron just looked confused. The vacant look on his face made Luna chuckle.

She turned to search for Draco in the cheering sea of Slytherins. She found him at last; Blaise was dragging him to stand up with the rest of them. It wasn't as if many of the Slytherins besides Draco and the three girls who had pulled the prank with the slippery stairs had ever paid much attention to Luna before. She wondered whether their excitement was genuine or more a display of victory over the other Houses, to have won this contest for her placement. It would be a matter of some notoriety to have been the choice of the only Sorting the school had ever seen of a student past their first year.

Oooh, and Draco didn't look too pleased. He wasn't smiling. He was just sort of staring off with a strange blank expression on his face. He glanced in Luna's direction for a moment, his brow furrowed and his face serious as if he was deep in thought. His expression softened for a moment, and he smiled gently at her, tipping his head in silent salute, and then whatever it was he had been thinking about carried him out of the Great Hall in the same direction Snape had taken. Professor McGonagall finally got Luna's attention and guided her over to the Slytherin table.

"We'll have the house-elves move your things for you. Please feel welcome to stop by and say any goodbyes you'd like to your Housemates. And I do so hope you will enjoy being in Slytherin. You can come see me if you ever need to talk about anything. All right, dear?" she asked kindly. Luna murmured a thank-you without commenting about not needing to say goodbye to anyone from her House. Some things were better left unsaid. "Here now, Pansy, will you be a dear and show Luna around her new House? It's so far into the year, and she won't know a thing about Professor Snape's rules for his House. Or even how to get there." Pansy seemed surprised by the request but nodded in assent.

A shaken-up Luna turned to find the placid, beautiful face of Pansy Parkinson waiting for her. "Luna," she said in greeting, a wry smile touching her lips. "Welcome to Slytherin."

Detention

Chapter 15 of 17

Luna and Draco report for detention with Professor Snape.

Pansy offered Luna up to the students of Slytherin. Luna was the center of a whirlwind of attention, with students she had never spoken to wishing her well and welcoming her to her new House. She barely registered how monumental it was that she was moving. She had been a Ravenclaw for all the time she had been at Hogwarts since she was a child. She didn't know a thing about how the Slytherin House worked, and she was most certainly not on the good side of Professor Snape.

Pansy suggested they head back to the common room so she could give Luna a tour, but Luna was determined to be on time to serve detention. She didn't want to anger Snape even more that evening. After she explained that to Pansy, the girls headed towards the dungeons together. Pansy insisted on walking Luna to Snape's classroom and promised to meet her back there after her detention was served and to guide her to her new dorm.

It was a thoughtful gesture, and Luna was touched, but also a little disappointed. She would have no chance to walk with Draco after detention. They wouldn't be able to talk in front of Pansy. She hoped they'd have a chance soon so that she could explain what had happened. Draco had looked out of sorts at the announcement of her move; she wanted to assure him that it had not been an intentional subterfuge.

Luna walked into Snape's Potions lab to find Draco and the Professor huddled in conversation at the back of the room. She cleared her throat in an effort to be courteous lest they think she was trying to spy on them. It struck her oddly that she was worried they might think she was spying because that implied they were up to something secretive. But something about their posture and hushed tones told Luna that they were engrossed in a discussion of a very serious nature. Professor Snape snapped his

head up to glare at her, and Draco turned his gaze to follow Snape's. The dreaded Potions Professor started towards her, and she saw Draco gather up a scroll and tie it, slipping it into his robes.

"Miss Lovegood, it seems there is more to you than meets the eye," Snape growled.

"Thank you, sir," she responded uncertainly. She looked to Draco for guidance, but his face was blank. His eyes fell to the floor. When he raised his head, he was looking at Snape and not Luna. That was odd.

Draco? she thought. *What should I do?* She let her gaze drift from Draco, who was studiously ignoring her, back to the waiting Professor Snape.

"Now that you have insinuated yourself into my House, I feel it is only fitting that I take a more thorough interest in your studies. Your habits," he said, drawing the last word out to emphasize his distaste, "will now reflect upon *my* House, and the points that you squander with your insufferable nonsense will now be subtracted from *my* House. You must know, Miss Lovegood, that I will not appreciate losing hard-earned Slytherin points on account of your poor behavior."

"Yes, sir," Luna said, trying to assuage the torrent of Snape's unpleasant words. She was not afraid of the "dungeon bat." In fact, she rather admired the strength of character it took to exist apart. It came at a cost, she well knew, the ability to stand alone and openly be different. He wore his differentness much like he wore his severe robes: for effect. His imposing persona billowed around him, but just like a Boggart, it only had power if you let it. Respect, yes, professors should be treated with respect, but she did not fear him.

"While Slytherins all enjoy their privacy, myself especially," he said pointedly. "It is a point of pride for the members of this House to work together for the benefit of their Housemates. There will be no petty foolishness or arguing among Housemates. Issues within the House remain just that: in the House. You would do well not to allow your selfishness—your defiance—to be a detriment to my House. Do not cost House points because you could not be bothered to meet the expectations that apply to every student in this school. And do not toy with me, or I will make this the most excruciating year of your school career."

Luna nodded bemusedly. "Yes, sir." She had not expected that she would ever end up in Professor Snape's House, much less having it occur just after having provoked him more than she had ever dared before. He thought she was going to be a troublemaker. Luna waited patiently for him to continue his barrage but met with nothing more than his appraising gaze for what seemed an awkward amount of time. Draco still hadn't faced her, but her eyes widened as she heard his voice saying, *Relax, you're doing fine.*

The pallid face of the Potions master remained unmoved. He hadn't heard it. Draco had spoken just to her from his mind. Luna was startled enough to choke on the breath she was taking in, starting a momentary fit of coughing. Her peripheral vision showed her that Draco had cracked a smile. *Try that with a mouthful of pumpkin juice!* She heard the smile in his tone and remembered the way he had choked at the dinner table earlier. That sent her into a fit of giggles that she covered with another round of coughing.

"Forget how to breathe, Lovegood?" Draco asked, out loud now, with a nasty smirk that fit his reputation but that belied his gentle tone.

"Enough," Snape barked. "The less of my time you waste, the better. You are here because of your poor behavior in Legilimency, so let me see just how useless you are at it."

Startled, Luna looked at Draco who only shrugged and then nodded. Luna raised her eyebrows at Draco as if to say, "If you're sure," and then turned to face Snape, who was standing over her. She took a breath, and as she let it out Draco could actually see her pupils dilate as she stared into Snape's eyes.

Luna shook her head as if to focus her vision. "Sir, I cannot seem to find any thoughts in your mind." It took only a split second before Luna realized what she had said. Unfortunately, she couldn't think of a way to salvage the situation, so she just held her tongue and looked inquiringly towards Draco.

"Miss Lovegood, is Mr. Malfoy conducting this detention, or am I?"

"You are, sir."

"Then please enlighten me as to why you continue to look at Mr. Malfoy before responding to me."

"I do not want to displease you unnecessarily. Draco is from Slytherin House; he is far more familiar with you... temperament than I am."

"Miss Lovegood, your detention will be spent scrubbing cauldrons by hand. Mr. Malfoy is being assigned to a different task. When I return, all the copper cauldrons will be spotless, or you will become far more familiar with my temperament." The last word he breathed out so that it lasted longer than the entire sentence that had preceded it.

"Yes, sir." Well, that would be easy enough. Luna immediately started rolling up her sleeves *Good luck,* she thought towards Draco as she passed him on her way to a pile of sticky-looking cauldrons. He wore a particularly pained expression. *What? Afraid you'll get something worse than scrubbing cauldrons?*

Yes. Much worse. At that moment Snape breezed out of the room, and with one last glance at Luna, Draco followed.

To The Pitch

Chapter 16 of 17

Draco and Luna reunite after their detention and plan the rest of their evening.

Luna found that the sticky-looking stuff dripping from the cauldrons was also smelly. And it stung her hands. She resorted to taking off her socks and putting them over her hands to protect them. Still, she counted herself lucky to be free of Professor Snape's glare. And she wasn't writing lines, which she hated more than any other school punishment. Her thoughts stayed with Draco, but she was picturing him tucked, as she was, in the bowels of the castle, never knowing he was actually far from it, trudging into the Forbidden Forest and preparing to leave the school grounds altogether.

Luna decided that scrubbing cauldrons was a lot like doing the dishes at her home. Except bigger, and there were more of them, and she had certainly never cooked anything so offensive-looking. Although she could remember a few meals when her dad was learning to cook that could probably have rivaled this goop. The memory made her giggle, and with her spirits light, she dug into the task with a song on her lips and a sway in her hips.

That was how Draco found her hours later: barefoot, sock-handed, humming and swaying as she scrubbed horrid stuff out of a dwindling pile of cauldrons. He couldn't

resist watching her, she looked so carefree. He felt like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, but coming back to Hogwarts and seeing her scattered the dark clouds that had been over his head since he had seen his father disheveled and disgraced in the smelly pub.

Professor Snape had been called away when the Dark Mark that tethered him to Voldemort had flared. He had provided Draco with a Portkey that would return him to the school grounds. Then he vanished into black smoke that reminded Draco of the acrid odor of the darkened pub. There was no telling when Snape would return, and Draco had a plan; he and Luna would go out to the pitch tonight and breathe some night air after all. It might be some of the last free time he would have.

Draco started soundlessly towards Luna, who was utterly absorbed in what she was doing. When he was barely a foot from her he started humming along with her, his clear baritone rumbling behind her.

She froze for a moment to concentrate on his presence. She felt the energy radiating from him and inhaled his unique smell of musk and a hint of cologne. She recognized him without ever looking at him and smiled.

He stepped up to press against her, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind.

"My hands are soaked in sap and witch hazel."

"What an opportunity for me, then," he drawled in her ear.

"Oh!" she squeaked.

Draco took advantage of the situation by lifting a hand to sweep the hair back and away from the side of her neck so he could lean in and whisper wordlessly against her skin. He kissed her on the gooseflesh that answered his hot breath, teasing her with his tongue. She made a sort of strangled sound, and he chuckled. Wickedly, he nipped at her, and she sucked in a breath. She remained stone-still with her dripping mittened hands over the sink so as not to make a mess on Professor Snape's classroom floor. Draco decided that if he was going to tease, he would make it memorable, and he opened his mouth to enclose the entire bridge of her shoulder, dragging his tongue across her skin. She sighed audibly.

Chuckling again, he leaned back and looked down at her, still as a sculpture with her eyes closed and her head tipped back on his chest. He kissed her on the cheek and stepped away to remove himself from temptation.

"So, are you about done with your cauldrons? I'm done with my detention."

"Snape likes you better. In fact, you were probably playing wizard chess with him while I scrubbed away down here," she teased.

"Not quite. But hey, let's go try to steal some time outside. Let's walk to the pitch. I think practice will be over, but . . . you'll get your wish and get to go outside."

"I have to finish cleaning these before Professor Snape gets back."

Draco smiled wickedly and snapped his fingers. Two pops sounded in the room behind him. He had needed to go to the Manor and handle some family business, but he had concocted a way to reap some rewards from his task. He had arranged for two of his house-elves to come and finish up Luna's work.

"Trust me?"

"You should never trust anyone who asks you to trust them."

That sounded like some convoluted logic, and he couldn't keep his eyes from rolling, but he shrugged nonchalantly. "I didn't ask you to trust me; I asked whether you do trust me. No matter. I have asked my elves to take over for you. Professor Snape will be gone for hours. We can take back the rest of our evening."

"My hero," she cooed, batting her eyelashes dramatically. "But how do you know he will be gone for hours? I think I'd better finish these before I leave."

Luna had only a dozen cauldrons left to be scrubbed, and the elves had started immediately and efficiently tidying them up.

"There'll be nothing left to do after you get your shoes on, birdie. It's cold out there. You can't go outside barefoot."

Seeing the truth in his statement, Luna thanked the startled elves and peeled the socks off her hands. They were a lost cause, so she threw them away and started searching for her shoes. She couldn't quite remember where she had set them down. Draco Accio'd them for her, and by the time she was put together, the elves had all but finished. When she said she was ready to go, Draco grabbed her hand, and away they went to try to capture the last bit of evening.

Pansy was sauntering down the corridor towards them when they started out.

"I'm here to escort our newest Slytherin to the common room."

"Your services won't be needed this evening," Draco said.

"Shall I start submitting my homework to you as well, Professor Malfoy? I was instructed to show her around. You don't have the authority to change that."

"Belt it, Pansy! I'll have her back to the common room soon enough."

"I hope so. Even though you can get her into our House, it doesn't mean you can get her into her room. She'll have to sleep on the girls' side tonight." Pansy's eyes shone with challenge.

"Well, well. The whispers are rampant in the common room, are they? What story is going around, then? Have I had my evil way with her? How'd I get her to come with me...placed her under the Imperius Curse, maybe?"

"Relax, Draco. No one is going to run tattling to Snape. I heard talk this morning about that lousy prank the girls pulled on her. They were bragging that Luna probably wandered the dungeons all night since they didn't see her on her way back to the common room. So that means it's just two little old Housemates who know she stayed. Me and Blaise, that is."

"Well, thank you for telling us that you knew. That saves us some confusion, yes?" Luna added calmly.

The other two seemed surprised that she had spoken, as if so engrossed in their dialogue that they had forgotten she was there.

Looking at Luna, Draco seemed to remember his purpose and the bluster went out of him.

"Sod it all, Pansy. After the day I've had, I have more on my mind than schoolyard rumors."

"You sound like my father...a day in the life of an overworked Death Eater."

Draco looked a little stricken. Her comment was born of years of growing up together while their fathers plotted the end of mixed-blood wizarding, but it still struck too close to home.

"Buy me some time," Draco bargained, "and I'll get your House chores reassigned to Liselle and Mary all the way until the hols."

"There's the Draco I know and love. Practical and philanthropic."

Draco snorted. "Go on, then. We'll be along."

"Right, but Draco, be careful. If you spend too much time with the Lovegood girl, there will be schoolyard whispers that even a Malfoy can't silence."

"Luna and I will be along," Draco said, his clenched jaw emphasizing that he referred to Luna intimately.

Pansy raised her eyebrows and nodded. She understood his inference; he was acknowledging the girl. "I'll cover for you. And Luna." Pansy faced the blonde girl and motioned towards Luna's forehead. "Things happened quickly tonight, and people don't scrutinize you very closely, so I think it went unnoticed. Your fringe mostly covers it, but it might be . . . prudent . . . to cover up that bruise before you come into the common room." With that she turned and walked back the way she'd come.

"Merlin's teeth, she is observant, isn't she?" breathed Luna.

"Annoyingly so."

"I don't know, I rather appreciate the insight."

"Fine, she's helped us this time. But enough of her. The stars are waiting to shine on you, Luna. Let's go."

Desperation

Chapter 17 of 17

Draco makes a desperate decision that will affect Luna in ways that neither of them can imagine.

The wizards who had created the Manor had shaped it with magic, imbued it with their own powers. There were layers and layers of spells built into the place, and all of them were meant to recognize only one master. The initiation spell that Draco had to perform would tether him to the Manor, and it called for his blood. Blood magic was generally regarded as Dark magic, but much of the truly old magic used blood. Blood tied the wizard to the spell or enchantment. It imbued the Manor with part of his life force, and in this case, the Manor cast its magical protection on Draco. When he ascended as the head of the family, the Manor's power rushed into him like a tidal wave. He fell to his knees as the place identified the ring he wore and poured into him the ancient Malfoy magic. He sensed the consciousness and antiquity of his home and began to understand how the magic, his magic now, worked.

Draco felt like the tip of a wand during a Lumos spell; he absolutely glowed from the inside. He was drunk with the power of the Manor. He was confident in a way he had never felt before. He was the man of the Manor now. And he was on his own. Professor Snape had hurried away. With a mischievous smirk, Draco arranged for two of his house-elves to meet him at the school after he returned so that they could finish Luna's detention for her. By the time he made his way back through the forest to the castle, Draco was sublimely pleased with himself. He had thought of a way to do something good. He had devised a plan to turn his new burden into something helpful, a blanket of safety. It was an admittedly dark blanket, but one he was sure was strong enough to protect Luna.

The Malfoys were descendants from a long line of cautious wizards who fiercely guarded what was theirs. Draco had only to include Luna in the Malfoys' circle of protection, and his family magic would do the rest. He just had to get Luna inside the protection of the Manor and the Malfoy magic. But he didn't want to force her; he wanted to *invite* her under his magical protection. As a young wizard, he had been given a talisman that marked him unquestionably as being under the protection of the Malfoys. All he had to do was give something to her, and then Luna, too, would share in the Malfoy magic.

Draco and Luna headed out to the Quidditch pitch. It was deserted; he had missed practice, but he was glad of it. He wouldn't have been able to concentrate on Quidditch at all tonight, not with everything that had happened in the past couple of days. He could barely keep up a casual banter when such important things were on his mind. The pair found themselves wandering the stands hand in hand.

"So, my little *Slytherin*, what hijinks have you got planned next?"

"Oh, I meant to tell you about that. It was all a misunderstanding. Blaise saw that my robes had the Slytherin emblem; I had forgotten to change it back. It all just ran away from me from there," Luna explained with a giggle.

"You are a calamity," Draco said affectionately.

"Am I? And what are you?"

Draco breathed deeply but did not answer. In the most innocent manner Luna asked, "Do you want to tell me what is bothering you, or shall I act as though I don't notice?"

There was the bluntness that he treasured in her. He smiled almost sadly. "Luna? I . . . My father . . . I...aaargh! Luna, things happened today that are going to cause a lot of changes."

"Yes, our lives being so entwined will make things very different. For both of us, I imagine," she said cautiously. She knew Draco's father was financially supportive of the Slytherin Quidditch team. As a philanthropic supporter of Slytherin House, he had been known to use his influence as a tool for manipulation. Was Draco concerned about his father finding out about the two of them?

So embroiled in his own thoughts was Draco that he rushed to ask the questions that had tortured him. "But it doesn't have to be in a bad way. You don't look unfavorably on us, do you?" Merlin's teeth, she had battled his own father at the Ministry; how could he expect her to accept the Malfoys' protection? But it was the only way.

"I don't judge a group of people based on the actions of an individual." Was he worried that she blamed the entire Slytherin house for the prank that the three girls had pulled? "Do you feel pressured to look after me? I don't want you to feel obligated." She didn't want him nervous as a nursemaid and at her elbow all hours of the day and night, even if his intentions were well meant. But if he were standing at her elbow with his lips on her neck . . . that she might like.

"I don't feel pressured, Luna. And I want you to feel welcome. It's just that I'm aware of our . . . reputation. I know there are wizards, classmates of ours, who judge us harshly. Wizards you have associated with." He was trying to lead her, to get her to let him know how she felt about his being a Malfoy, son of a Death Eater, but he was tongue-tied.

With a formal air Luna stated, "Each person's opinions are his own, not the groups'. You cannot infer such things from either proximity or association."

Draco raised his eyebrows. She had just given him an answer so formal that he had to puzzle through what she said to suss out what she meant.

Smiling at his wrinkled forehead and look of concentration, she took mercy on him and explained. "I cannot speak for anyone but myself. But just because I lived in Ravenclaw and was in Dumbledore's Army with Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, doesn't mean I bare a prejudice against Slytherin House, or even the members of the Inquisitors Squad."

Draco clenched his jaw. He was starting to get confused. And Luna was being evasive. Or was she? She always was sort of cryptic, and he wasn't being very clear. He was going nowhere with this approach. He needed to be blunt and businesslike. "I'm trying to find out how you would feel about being... Look, I have responsibilities now, but taking them on has given me a great deal of authority."

She looked at him quizzically.

"I'm the Head now." *The head of a disgraced family tied inexorably to the Dark Lord* he thought despairingly. But at least he had finally said it.

"Oh, I didn't know." Head Boy, was he? He had told Pansy he would get her chores reassigned. It could explain his and the professor's whispering and why they had left her during detention. She could see this weighed heavily on him and hoped some lighthearted teasing would pull him from his somber mood. "Well, I don't plan to cause any trouble for you, Mr. Malfoy." She smiled reassuringly.

After a moment the corner of his mouth twitched. "I don't think you plan any of the trouble you cause."

"Maybe not." Her eyes twinkled in the light of the moon.

"Okay, Birdie." He laughed; the tension he had been feeling started to fade. She had called him Mr. Malfoy, acknowledging that he was head of the Malfoy family. She offered him not only acceptance, but also her cooperation. Maybe she could help him shoulder this burden. He might not have to be alone in this struggle.

"This is for keeping you out of trouble." Draco reached up and tugged at his loosened tie knot and unbuttoned collar. Behind his neck, he began fiddling with something. Drawing his hands up behind his head, he pulled a pendant from inside his shirt. He unclasped it and set it just below her collarbone. Meeting her eyes, he said softly, "This will protect you from 'ghoulies and ghosties, and long-legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night'." A sad smile touched his lips as he recited the children's rhyme.

Luna gathered her hair up and out of the way to allow him access to her neck, wincing a bit as she moved a still-sore shoulder.

Draco clasped the chain behind her, letting the cool silver slide down into her blouse. Bending down to lay a kiss on the side of her neck, he whispered lasciviously, "You'll be safe from everything but me." She remained very still, so he took the opportunity to run his tongue across the tender skin of her neck before he leaned back to look at her again.

She shivered from the touch of his tongue and dropped her hair. The place he had kissed felt cool in the night air and the chain felt oddly heavy.

Luna felt a comforting wave of old magic sweep over her. It must be a charmed pendant. What a sweet generosity he was showing to welcome her into Slytherin. It felt like a powerful charm. He hadn't had time to make a new charm, so maybe it was one he already had, something of his own. The thought delighted her.

Draco looked down at her, so radiant in the moonlight, and ached for her. He would do her more good by protecting her, even if it meant bringing her into his dark and dangerous world, than by abandoning her and hoping she fared well without him. And he would do better knowing she was safe with him. Draco had been given a grave new set of responsibilities, and with them came new dangers but also a heady array of power. His body still thrummed with the magic that he had been a part of earlier that night. Malfoy magic. He was drunk with it and it emboldened him. Surely the magic he had taken in tonight would be strong enough to protect both of them. In that moment Draco had made a decision, a passionate and desperate decision to keep Luna.

With Luna, Draco felt better than in any other dark corridor of his life. As much as he didn't want to drag her through that, she was his light in the darkness. He was exhausted from the tension of stumbling blindly; it felt so good to have something good in his life. When he might have given up on himself, he knew he would keep fighting for her.

She gazed at him for what must have been an hour...or two minutes at least...and after biting her bottom lip a moment in indecision, she leaned up onto her toes and kissed him.

It had been a very emotional evening. And a very frustrating evening for Draco, and he did not have his wits about him to stop her. She kissed him senseless, and it was as if she could tell his weakness because she persisted, turning him back towards the seat behind him and coercing him to sit. Her hair was falling all around them as she showered him with her kisses.

And then she had an idea. A wonderful, terrible idea. She remembered how it had felt when he had kissed her neck with the hot wetness of his mouth, and she decided to go after his neck the same way. She slid her hand behind his head so she could have better access, and she nibbled and licked at his skin, tasting the saltiness of him.

Draco was quite sure he'd go mad. He didn't even realize he was making noise until she sat up and looked down at him like the kneazle that had gotten the cream.

"You're growling again," she said when he blinked up at her.

He must have looked as though he didn't know why she had stopped. "Yeah," he said, a little breathless, "you were doing that too right." He reached up to trail a finger along the side of her jaw. She remained still, looking down at him with the moonlight shining in her eyes. "Well? Don't stop," he whispered.

So she didn't.