

Winter Apples

by moiramountain

He was meant to be his father's heir... He was meant to be the best of his House. He was not meant to suffer shame that even the lowliest of creatures should never bear.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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Chapter 1

It was loneliness, pure and simple, that drove him into the kitchen. He could pretend all he wanted that it was idle curiosity or his right to be entitled in his own house...even if that house was only an orchard keeper's lodge...but those were lies. And if he were going to craft deceptions, there was no sense wasting them on something so shaming as his fear of being alone.

The kitchen was the largest room of the place, meant to be both head and heart. The half-timbered walls, fortified at their corners with barrels and bins, breathed the scent of generations of hearth-fires and their simmering kettles. The beamed ceiling was an arbor of the practical, amply pegged for clusters of reed baskets and string bags swollen with their weight of winter vegetables. Battered pots and pans, ladles and spoons hung suspended like the inverted helmets and blunted weaponry of some benignly departed army. A rich dust of dried herbs and ground spices hung in the air above a wide-flagged floor worn into shallow valleys of passage between grate and stove and cupboards. Honest in its appearance and its purpose, this kitchen...

For Draco Malfoy, there was comfort...and dread...in such simplicity.

"Merlin's robes, elf," he scowled from the doorway, "you're making enough of a damn racket in here to wake..."

The dead...

The words almost slipped out, but he bit them back, hard and fierce. Death, dying, dead...words he owned, but not an inheritance he wanted. The only real coin of his realm, nowadays, those words, and always close at hand, weighing heavy in his empty pockets.

Kicking a chair away from the sand-scrubbed table, he settled himself, long legs stretched towards the peat fire in deliberate interference, arms folded across his chest in a perfect rendering of boredom. Quite perfect... except for the tic of his thumb, darting to touch the tip of each companion finger on his empty wand hand... cycling forward and back... forward and back...

"There's no peace anywhere in this wretched hovel, not with you banging around in here. What is it you're up to?" From long habit, he affected a disgusted sulk, but it was hard to hold on to. "Probably something not worth the bother." Obviously, the house-elf was cooking. Whatever there was to be had, it would, at least, be tolerable. A bit of food might be to his benefit...if the subtle savagery, deep in his gut, would only go quiet for a while. It wasn't hunger that plagued him...he'd long since lost interest in the tedium of eating...but he would allow himself the lie.

Tending her pans and kettles, the creature at the stove, with skin as cracked and brown as oak-bark and steam-wreathed hair hanging in mossy clumps, could have been

taken for some shrunken tree that had been charmed to move and speak. Sliding a lid into place with a clatter, she braced the small of her back with her hands and turned to face Draco with all the dignity of her domain.

"Was Sir needing something from me, maybe tea? I am keeping a little of the Tieguanyin saved for you." The young man gave her no acknowledgment, but whether because he was annoyed with her or because his thoughts were elsewhere made no difference. Tradition would expect her to make an apology.

"If Sir is unhappy with my noise, then Turtlefoot is very sorry, but this meal is having to be ready before Mistress and Alchemer Sir are here. They will need good food after going inside the Forsaken Stones. I am knowing that Mistress is never eating before she goes there, and Alchemer Sir is not so strong that he should travel again this soon. Being well should be enough for anyone to ask from him." A spark of determination flamed in the elfin crone's deep-set eyes as she positioned herself directly in Draco's line of sight. "Turtlefoot is wondering if Sir may wish to look again? This place would be better for you and Mistress to live, and Alchemer Sir might be content here. The trees here be lonely for a blessing song." Rubbing her leathery hands together, she seemed about to overflow with anticipation. "Now, if Sir will pardon me for saying, if nothing is wanted, I should be finishing. Proper manor-elves are never late in setting out a meal, not for all the seasons I be in service. Not even terrible, ugly Death Lord was making that so."

With a sudden lunge, Draco was on his feet, a surge of bile clawing at the back of his throat. A blade of late-day sun carved hollows of anger...and fear...into the spare, patrician angles of his face.

"But you're not anymore, are you...a proper manor-elf? Maybe you need to shut it and not go on so much. And no more of this blessing prattle, either, got it? I know you understand me, so don't pretend otherwise."

"Turtlefoot understands. Sir is not wishing anything to do with blessings. Is Sir giving me punishment?" she quietly replied, focusing on Draco's clenched fist. Seeing where her gaze fell, the young wizard quickly shook his head and let his fingers uncurl. His thumb promptly resumed its search for the blind reassurance of contact with its fellows.

"No, but do I want you talking to me about this place? What a question. Just how likely do you think that is? You must be out of your bloody mind. We're shite on people's boots, in case that's slipped your notice." The young man's voice cracked under the weight of a false authority. "It hasn't slipped mine. My mother should never have to enter Azkaban on her own. I've owed to see my father how many times? But the Ministry won't even let me wait outside the gates. The bastards are glad enough for Magister Snape to go inside, though. Divide and conquer..." Strain coarsened his usual cultivated drawl. "Care to bet they're hoping for something 'regrettably unforeseen' to happen when we're separated like this? One or two Gatherers coming here, I could probably hold off, but any more than that... They'd have us both quick enough. They're bound to want a name for themselves for wiping out the last of us."

With a swipe of temper, Draco raked back the unkempt spill of web-silk hair that fell across his brow. "If you've still half a wit, you'll keep quiet about even knowing us, much less staying on," he ranted, sweeping his arm in a sudden, violent arc that sent platters and bowls crashing from the table onto the stone floor. "Go ahead, elf...just try it...let on that you give a bloody damn about a Malfoy. You'll get your share of regret for it if you do."

"Turtlefoot is already having that," the elf replied, advancing into his storm to lay her gnarled hand against his arm. Her knobby fingers rested so lightly that they barely grazed his shirtsleeve, but they were enough to persuade Draco back into his seat.

"Yeah, well, no surprise, there," he glowered, "not with the choices you made. Nice punishment you set for yourself... exile and disgrace. Seems a bit much, even for your lot." Shrugging his arm from under her hand with what might have been reluctance, he slumped forward to prop his elbows on the table, resting his forehead against the heels of his hands, his long, delicate fingers hooking into claws.

The house-elf stood quietly, lightly tapping the bowl of a wooden spoon against her palm as she studied the young wizard. For a long while, the only other sound to be heard was the low-sung round between the shivering pot lid on the stove and the inquisitive wind in the chimney.

"Why *did* you stay, Turtle-ma'am?"

Turtlefoot froze, unsure for a moment of what she'd heard. Sir hadn't used that childish endearment, and likely hadn't even thought of it, since well before his Hogwarts letter. She had simply tucked the little name away, a crumbling token of yet another among so many pure-ling children, all of them far past the wish or need for her attentions. And yet, this beautiful, dangerous shard of a boy was thinking that he should be ready to defend more than just himself.

"The rest were glad enough to go...hell, they damn near danced out the door in those horrid jumpers." The elf could see a thin grimace twist the young man's lips. "Funny thing, but before that, I can't say I'd ever heard any of you laugh."

In the lengthening shadows, the silver of Draco's eyes had tarnished to pewter.

"Other than a roof over your head, what else could you hope to gain from being here with us? I know whatever you didn't see, you heard. You elves always listen."

To the old servant's way of thinking, the sullen accusation was both challenge and petition. If she propped the doors for him, young Sir might have just the reason he wanted to step inside whatever Room of Lost Things held the darker secrets of his wary heart. Busying herself with clearing away the broken crockery, she extended the invitation.

"That's elves' gift, Sir...when we are listening, we be learning what our house is needing most," she cautiously nudged, ready to hear what she did, in fact, already know...or at the very least, suspect.

"What's needed most? Good luck, figuring that. A bottle of anything decent and my wand would be a bloody start," seemed to be the only response the young man intended to make. With a tiny shrug and a shake of her head, Turtlefoot turned to resume her work, only to stop at the sound of a ragged edge of breath.

"I used to listen...thought I was getting away with something." Draco's voice ran so low, he might have been talking to himself, but Turtlefoot thought not. "Father and his friends knew...probably why they'd always wait until very late to start talking about the Dark Lord." Watching the young wizard, the elf could remember the high-born boy, always so drawn to the intrigue of secrets. "None of it seemed quite real...except the Marks. They kept those covered...but I'd seen my father's. He'd told me it was once the symbol of a pure-blood's honor. I liked the sound of that...a great Dark Lord, gathering the power of real magic." Draco's fine-boned hand strayed now to his throat, fidgeting idly with his shirt button, tugging his collar closed. "If any of it was true and He did return...I wanted that...to be chosen and Marked as His...."

With a flick of his other hand, the young wizard waved the lowering fire into a stronger flame. "Maybe there'd be battles, but so what?" Turtlefoot could hear the boy's arrogance struggling to keep its foothold. "It couldn't last that long, not with men like my father leading the attacks. I'd have my chance to prove myself to the right people...impress the pretty witches. Just some brilliant dueling, maybe a tasteful scar...nothing too serious. Besides, things would settle soon enough. No more denying who we are...we'd be in charge, right out in the open, in control of the balance in both worlds. Even the Muggles would come to heel, once they'd learned their proper place. They just needed to be shown what was best for them, that's all."

Grim-faced, Turtlefoot busied herself with sweeping...remembering proud, cold voices, dismissive and indifferent, reminding her always where she belonged.

In the fading light, the young wizard's thin face was becoming a mummer's mask, his voice drained of inflection, as though he were reciting by rote. "My mother would be so proud, and my Father... I'd be everything the Malfoy heir should be...all the best of Slytherin."

Bowing his head, Draco stared down at his hands, twitching in tandem on the worn tabletop like pale, netted fish. His voice thickened into a rasping whisper.

"It wasn't quite like that. When the Lord decreed I was to be Marked, they said I should be grateful for His mercy...that He'd never Marked anyone quite so young as me." Turtlefoot saw the shudder that crept over the boy's whippet-thin frame. "But with Father disgraced, there'd be no Honoring Circle to stand witness... just a clearing in the Forest, and no one with me. Robes and the mask... nothing else, not even boots... and no wand. The mask would let me breathe, but I couldn't see. Kneel and keep silent, that's all I knew to do. I wanted to be noble and proud, but I was scared half to death." Draco's eyes were heavy-lidded, drugged with memory.

"Before I could even raise my head, He was there...the Dark Lord...slamming into my mind, summoning the Mark. I remember... I do... how it was... the words of the spell. His magic split me open... every sense, every thought... I couldn't control anything... not even my breathing..." As he struggled to remain upright in his chair, Draco's left hand began to knock against the weathered wood of the table. "I hurt so much... like every dark curse in Hades was crawling through my body. When He showed me what I was to do... what would happen if I failed... In my mind, I could see Greyback, crouched over my parents' bodies, howling and snapping... beckoning to me... I could even smell the stench of him...."

Such horror, to see one's family suffer so needlessly... and all because of your weak and useless abilities. I imagine your father would agree....

Turtlefoot stepped closer, clutching the handle of her broom as though it were her battle sword, but as Draco continued, she remained silent.

"I tried to keep those horrible images out of my mind... tried not to know... But I did... I knew perfectly... Our lives or Dumbledore's death... a simple enough bargain... just shape the proper plan. After all, I'm Slytherin... That's our gift." Draco's tight-lipped smirk was a mocking grotesquerie. "We had quite the little chat, there at the last...the Headmaster and me...all about the finer points of murder and mercy...until he asked me if I wanted another way and I couldn't... I'd waited too long... lost my nerve... The old man's saying killing's not easy for an innocent... and there's me, the youngest one ever Marked. Innocent... What the bloody fuck was I supposed to do with that?"

With another flick of his hand, Draco urged the fire still higher. The room was thick with heat, but not a drop of sweat beaded his rigid face. "So, even though the Lord had what He wanted... I'd still failed Him... and He'd cast curses for the smallest offense. For this, He'd have me begging before I even hit the floor, I knew it... Gods, I didn't want my mother to hear that... He had my father's stick and I was sure He meant to kill me with it. But all He did was strike the snake's head, hard and vicious, across my Mark to make me bleed. He said that was the symbol of a pure-blood's shame... something I could show my heir... and then He just... dismissed me... like..."

"Like an elf?" Turtlefoot whispered, a tinge of bitter triumph in her question.

"Yeah... like that." Draco flinched, turning his face away but not so quickly that she couldn't see the last flush of color drain from his ashen cheeks.

"After that, this..." The fingers of his left hand curled into themselves, the veins at his wrist twisting like wire under the skin. "... was always moving, watching. It burned, all the time... wasn't supposed to, not unless He called us, but mine did. For months, the wound wouldn't heal properly, but Magister Snape warned me to bear it and not to complain...never to complain."

Draco's left fist slid from the table, its weight landing with a heavy thud against his thigh.

"After Azkaban...once Bellatrix was in our house...life was one great Yule for her, until she'd want the bodies out. Thank your gods, Turtle-ma'am...elves weren't needed for that. Only certain people got to throw dear Aunt Bella's broken toys away. Every time with me...the same fucking thing...her laughing that maybe I'd grow a set of balls if she kept me hauling out the filth." Draco's fist rose to hover above his leg, only to hammer down again. "Pretty soon, it got to be people that I knew from school...tortured out of their skulls, soiling themselves when they died, right there on the silk carpets around Mother's harp... Do you remember that, Turtle-ma'am... how I used to love those little fairie waltzes she'd play for me?" A scald of laughter escaped him. "No more waltzes for us... What's that expression... something about the family that maims and murders together...?"

Though his fist began to leap and strike more cruelly, in counterpoint to the snapping flames, Draco simply cocked his head, as if a riddle had presented itself.

"Lovegood... I could never quite figure that one. I was expected to... refine... my hexing skills on her. Sometimes when I'd come for her, she'd smile and tell me I shouldn't be afraid of all the Thestrals around me... that they'd see past what I was doing. Crazy mad Luna... I wondered if maybe I ought to kill her...just let some hex go a bit too long by mistake. Not a murder... a destined accident... She'd be free of us, that way... and I'd be free of her. " The young wizard's tone was strangely gentle. "And Granger... bloody know-it-all Gryff, she tried so hard not to scream... kept staring at me like she thought if she hated me enough it would help. Didn't work..."

There was a long emptiness, broken only by the unwavering, muffled drumbeat of the fist against Draco's thigh. The old elf began to wonder if bones so carefully abused would finally splinter, and whether the young wizard might have more to say. He did.

"When Burbage... Professor Burbage... It only took His snake an hour or so... She wasn't very big." Draco gagged around the taste of gorge in his mouth. "I used to love to get a rise out of her...always good for a laugh to make some crack that Muggle Studies were worthless because Muggles were worth less than even Mudbloods and Squibs. Pretty piss-poor joke... She asked me once, after I'd won a match, why I wasn't seeking something more worthwhile in my life than Snitches. I thought she was ridiculous..."

The fist remained relentless.

"We weren't going to be forgiven, ever. Father couldn't seem to keep that straight. He'd start in about me putting things right...like either of us could do that. I'd see my mother at the windows, and I'd hear her in the halls...and sometimes I'd pretend she was already dead...that all of us were just ghosts roaming the house. You can't kill what's already dead... or so I'm told. I didn't see our elves. Maybe they know if my parents ever talked to each other. They probably would know that..."

Unseen, Turtlefoot nodded. It was no longer clear whether Draco was even aware that she was still there, standing so close she could see the pale promise of stubble on his chin.

"When the Snatchers caught Potter... someone asked me... I could have said... I knew the fuck it was him... He looked about as scared shitless as I was... But maybe not... maybe not... If I said 'yes', they'd call the Dark Lord and I didn't want Him there. I kept telling myself... don't give them a reason, Malfoy... no reason..." An almost wistful expression softened Draco's drawn face. "Right when that chandelier fell, I knew... I knew... Potter was going to get away... He'd be out... and I almost shouted at him... 'Take me...' I wonder if he would have done..."

The young wizard closed his eyes, lost to his labyrinth of memory and confession.

"Maybe Vince was thinking that, right at the end... Poor dim bastard... I wish he'd done what I told him, just the one last time... but he never was much for thinking things through." Draco's voice dropped even lower, so soft that Turtlefoot strained to hear. "Greg and me...we still had that awful smell on us, and he ran...just took straight off away from there and left me. No surprise, I guess... I did keep him from falling into the flames, though, so maybe that counts for something."

The rise and fall of Draco's fist began to waver. Exhaustion was taking the field, and with little resistance.

"After that, no more plan... When my parents... I was just in a corner, trying not to be seen... I hadn't expected that... them coming..." A deadly resignation was coiling itself around Draco's voice. "Sometimes I have these dreams about the Dark Lord... about if He'd won. It would have been an awful death... the three of us... and long. Days, if Bellatrix had her hand in it. She would have enjoyed that... getting to have her perfect reward."

Turtlefoot saw Draco's head suddenly loll back, distorting his features into a canvas of disgust and torment.

"When He Marked me, I found out about the Lord's... rewards."

So ready to attain, aren't you, Draco? So full of need.

"Everything was white with pain and I was slipping into an awful cold... I couldn't move... couldn't breathe enough to scream... All I could hear was His voice."

Your Lord binds you. Receive my punishment and its reward. Bear this Mark... Give it back ten-fold in blood... Live in death.

"The Mark was moving through me... I was dying from it... until the power started shifting. I could feel the change. No pain... none... just... gone... like it never was. I was so grateful for it to be over... not to be in agony anymore... and my body... I could breathe... Breathing was the most wonderful thing I could imagine... and I responded... It started to feel like the Mark was everywhere, not just my arm... inside me, all over me, touching me... everywhere... It felt so good... really good... intense... like the magic

had hands on me, like it was stroking me... my cock... and a mouth that was sucking me off...."

Satisfy yourself, little beast. Your Lord acknowledges obedience.

To Turtlefoot's horror, Draco moaned, the sound of his need primal and wanton.

"I got hard... so fucking hard... and I wanted..."

Such a willing animal, so readily acquired, so easily rewarded.

"Oh gods, I WANTED... I wanted to fuck so bad... fuck... and bleed... and die, if He asked me to... I was close... so close... but it changed... everything was... one magic... and I was living the nightmare again, over and over... my family being endlessly murdered... Greyback, howling over them... Oh gods, I needed it to stop... the other part... what the Mark was doing to my body... I couldn't be seeing those horrible things... and still be aroused... My mind would break...."

Are you afraid, Draco, horrified by what you see? Perhaps you are sickened with yourself? You wish to deny yourself the pleasures of your reward?

"I was begging Him... Please, no more, not this... Make this stop... Please, kill me, but don't make this happen... Don't make me go on... Don't let me..."

You may not refuse your reward and you will understand. I decide what your mind and body will accept, little beast. I decide whether you know agony or pleasure. I decide.

"Greyback... When the Lord was in my mind, I could still hear that awful howling... I was screaming in pain and I was so afraid.... The Mark was clawing me open... I couldn't make anything stop... and I... Gods, forgive me... I came... like an animal, on my knees, in the dirt...."

Panting harshly, Draco doubled over, hiding himself behind a tangled fall of hair.

"I just laid there in my mess... The mask was gone and I could open my eyes. It was only the Dark Lord in my mind and the Mark... Nobody there but me..."

The old elfanny could no longer bear to stay silent.

"Sir was only wanting to live..."

Forcing himself upright, Draco looked down at the faltering fist, still skittering weakly against his leg. "You shouldn't talk, elf, not until you know the ending. It's not polite. You'd miss the rest and I'd have to punish you. Don't look at me, though. Don't fucking dare to look at me... unless you want to see just how perfectly... blessed... I am."

Turtlefoot could see the hand of madness, reaching... almost there... almost touching the young wizard.

"When the mask fell away at dawn, I could see the blood... where it had dried on me... I hurt... there... and all over... inside... I could smell him... on the air... on me... Greyback..."

Thought it was the Dark Lord, did you? Wasn't Him having you, boy, though the Mark did play its part. He doesn't fancy that sort of thing. No, little Death Eater, you were my treat for standing witness to your Marking. A shame, though, bleeding you and not finishing. Time enough to make that right. Such a pretty pet, aren't you? If you behave, maybe I'll gut you quick, right before I do your mother. Then again, there's you and your father... Two Silvers in my pack... Very nice bit of irony that would be...

The old elf bit down hard on one knobby finger, willing herself not to wail her sorrow to the heavens.

"Mustn't complain, though, never complain. But you should have left us, Turtle-ma'am." Draco's face was an empty page. "You should leave now."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

He was meant to be his father's heir... the best of his House. He was never meant to suffer shame that even the lowest of creatures should not be forced to bear.

Chapter 2

Invisible as Turtlefoot had always been amidst the doings of pure-ling wizardry, she'd known so many closely guarded shames and secrets. No one bothered to hide themselves from an elf, any more than they'd hide from a crup that happened to be in the room. Yoked to the traditions and rituals of a blighted sense of honor, nearly every great house bore its own stains of decay. All it took was the squint of an eye, the tilt of a head or the brush of a hand... and there... just there... like watermarks on satin...

No matter which family they tended, elves always shared whispers—stories of dark and dreadful deeds that were swiftly covered over by their masters' intrigues—and their own labors. The guise of those abuses might vary, but never the outcome. The markers of Young Sir's brutal undoing could certainly have passed for something else, what with the war going on right at their feet. There was no comfort in knowing she'd been right—in the shape of this particular horror if not in its hideous details.

It would be so easy to give in to a carefully muted sorrow, and not just for the boy. Who would blame her? Far too much had been forever lost, and she was so very old—had already served her masters long enough and well enough. Still, the magic of elves is a practical and seasoned art, and Turtlefoot had refined hers long ago. Without question she was still sorely needed here, so perhaps it would be best to find her solace in the patterns of her work and save her regrets for later.

The soft slap of her bare feet marking time, she began to hum softly under her breath, moving from place to place within the kitchen, filling the kettle, stirring her pots, opening and closing various drawers and cupboards, gathering the things she wanted. With sound and scent, she gradually layered the room with small hints of what could be held onto, what was sheltering and real.

More than once, she paused to assure herself that Draco was still near the fire, but other than her humming, she kept her silence. An unwanted touch, a misplaced word, offered too soon, could send the boy bolting in search of solutions that might well mean an end to him. Whether he'd ever again have the desperate courage to face this moment was unlikely if she could not keep him safely there with her a bit longer. His path after that, she wouldn't presume to know. She could only hope that it might be a better one.

When all was as she fancied it, the old elf waved a high-legged stool close beside the motionless young wizard and, with a small grunt of age, clambered up so that she

could read his face.

“Dragonwing, you be listening to me?”

She spoke with the calm familiarity of an elfanny very used to soothing a willful, pure-ling child, coaxing his grudging attention.

Draco did not answer.

No matter. From his first indignant wail of life, she'd watched over this boy—had seen him defined in his beauty and ugliness, devotion and spitefulness, tenderness and cruelty. She would be patient.

Keeping her crooning low in her throat, Turtlefoot slowly leaned in to let her hands hover over Draco's. There was not even a twitch of muscle in response to the feather-light brush of her fingers. The old elf was very careful to touch only his hands, avoiding his rigid body, particularly the arm he kept pulled so tightly against his side. Time passed, pooling into shadow, and words began to surface from her humming into a creaking, sing-song murmur—a sigh of spring through winter-struck branches.

“Here sits old Turtle, waiting, waiting,

Watching the skies high above.

N'dai, mi slee, n'dai.

And there is bright Dragonwing, flying, flying,

Watching the earth far below.

N'dai, mi slee, n'dai.

And who will sing?

Old Turtle will sing.

Aielae, aielae.

And who will laugh?

Bright Dragon will laugh.

Aiele'he, aiele'he.”

Over and over, her little song repeated, braiding the speech of wizard-kind and elfin-kind together. She would wait. When the boy heard her, he would answer.

Ever so slowly, like roots easing their way between the threading cracks in stone, her gnarled fingers became gradually more insistent, steadily working their way into Draco's fists until their fierce clenching abruptly shattered and they lay open and helpless in his lap. And ever so quietly, as he began to tremble, her long arms branched around his narrowed shoulders and held on tightly, for he would surely fall if she were to let him go.

“Dragonwing, you be listening to me.”

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Draco's surrender to Turtlefoot's quiet persistence came in a great heaving gasp as he clung to her like a drowning man pulled from a storm-frenzied sea.

His pleas for whatever comfort she could offer came as strangled whispers against her shoulder, his sobs speaking to her in muffled shudders. He'd trained himself very well not to be heard.... A Death Eater would never openly weep....

When he dropped his head between his knees and retched, she vanished the whiskey-soured sick for both their sakes. To have the boy further shamed by his body's instincts was pointless.

The stinging tears of piercing grief and raging shame that tracked his face and hands with their salt, she left alone. Those were necessary. Those, he must remember.

In the way of all the elfanny, she kept a deep and steady rhythm, slowly rocking, softly chanting, as much for herself as for Draco.

Just as he'd accused, she had seen... had indeed heard... knew far too many things. The Marking, she'd sensed as soon as she'd seen Young Sir approaching the manor gates—clearly, not every torture that the Death Lord and His wolfriche had laid on the boy, but enough to anger and repulse her. The cold and bitter wraith of foul magic and dark blood had walked with Draco from his summoning. She knew its unseen face. Far too many of the great houses had welcomed it in and never seen it leave.

Young Sir had stayed closely warded in his rooms for three days after, answering his mother's entreaties only once.

“Mother, there's nothing you can do for me. If you cannot let me be, at least keep still... please....”

His chamber elves' anxious inquiries were met with menacing silence. Food, sent in as temptation, remained untouched. Whiskey, demanded by the smashing of each emptied decanter, did not.

The only constant to affirm his presence had been the recurring rush of water in the pipes to his bath. Trapped in the harsh watchlight of her sister's leering smile, Mistress had haunted the gallery outside her son's chambers, coveting and dreading the brief spans of quiet from behind the door, only to be stricken over and again by the sound of the torrent that Draco had let run and run and run....

At least one elf had whispered that the draining water had been tinged with crimson....

When Young Sir finally left his isolation, every trace of color, the palest flush of youth, had been leeches away. All that remained of Draco Ebenus Malfoy was a palette of gray and black—no trace of the proudly verdant hues of his House. Even the argent glory of his hair had faded. Turtlefoot had needed no ancient wisdom to realize that the boy saw himself as already dead.

But because she was only an elf... because she was too old to bear much punishment... because it was not her place or right to speak... she'd kept her distance and her silence.

Looking now at the ruin of promise slumped in exhaustion and despair against her shoulder, Turtlefoot thought perhaps she'd had quite enough of keeping both.