

Rolling Downhill

by moiramountain

Created in response to a prompt given for the HP Friendship Fest 2012. During the final months of the War, there was only one person Draco Malfoy was honest with - Luna Lovegood. Regretfully, these fascinating folk are JK's creations, not mine. Would it were otherwise.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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When the Snatchers brought her, it shouldn't have mattered. It should have been easy to look away, not to let on that he saw. More than anything, he wished that Lovegood hadn't looked up just then and seen him...that she hadn't nodded...because now it would have to matter. They'd expect something from him where she was concerned.

It'd been bad enough Easter last when they'd dragged Master Ollivander through the grand salon. Shivering and faint, the wandmaker had sought to catch Draco's eye, beckoning with a skeletal finger for him to come closer, stammering something about needing to understand the contradictions of hawthorn and the melancholy of unicorn hair. Ollivander hadn't been quite clear, though, which of them should seek that particular wisdom. It had seemed prudent not to visit him in the cellars to ask.

The old man claimed to recall every wand he'd ever crafted and who it had...or hadn't...chosen. Saying something like that, had he actually thought he'd escape the Dark Lord's notice long enough to die peacefully in his own bed? No one did that anymore.

The matter of choices wasn't something Draco wanted to dwell on too intently. He didn't want to dwell on anything too intently...not with the Dark Lord away from the manor for a little while. That could have counted as his Christmas gift...with Bellatrix's absence being the lovely shiny bow on top.

But now Luna Lovegood was here and she was no gift at all.

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The massive Yule log in the grand salon had burned steadily for three days, leaving only its ghostly ash by the time his aunt returned from wherever she'd been sent. The hearth was as cold as her gorgon's smile when she motioned Draco to take a seat beside her.

"You must reassure me, I think, that you've not neglected your studies during these holidays. The Dark Lord has certain expectations of you, even though you've been a great disappointment." With a simper, she let the talon of her wand ruffle Draco's hair before settling the tip ever so lightly against the pulse of his neck. "You'll not want to follow in your father's footsteps. I'm sure you don't mean for our master to further regret your Marking, do you, my pet?"

Draco nudged his apprehension into an unoccupied corner of his mind, praying that Bellatrix was only playing at being the solicitous aunt.

"We know you've an ability for Occlumency, but the quality of your curses leaves room for doubt. Given your previous... shortcomings... some might question your sincerity." The tip of the wand pressed the tiniest bit harder. "The Snatchers have been while I was away, I hear. Don't you think we might have just the thing to help you

improve?"

When Draco failed to answer with anything more than a practiced shrug, Bellatrix swept to her feet and turned on him with a hiss. "Oh really, Draco, don't be coy. It hardly suits you." She advanced to lean over him, the tangles of her raven hair falling like Devil's Snare around her face. "Since all in this house serve our Lord except for your wretched elves and those two filthy creatures in the cellar, who did you think I might be suggesting? The old man is already half-dead and not worth the waste of anyone's magic. Not even yours."

Draco's heart lurched in dread. Just as he'd feared, something was expected of him.

"Looney Lovegood?" he sulked, hoping for indifference in his voice. "She's barmy as a March hare. Why is she even here? There's barely a brain in her head."

"Precisely, Draco. We mustn't be wasteful of the opportunity. You're not worthy of your Mark, and she's weak-minded, even if she is a Ravenclaw. I'd consider you the perfect match," Bellatrix said with a smirk. "She'll do quite nicely. Now, then. Where would you like to play? I'm sure you'll want a bit of privacy. You needn't shame yourself when some of the refinements to your curses are less than perfect."

Draco's thoughts raced for cover behind a hasty shield. Somewhere menacing enough, somewhere private... somewhere Bellatrix didn't generally care to visit...

"The old falconer's suite in the West Tower would do, Aunt," he replied, allowing a hint of pleasure to cross his face. "It's still decently furnished, and I do prefer to be comfortable when I study."

With a leer, Bellatrix bent so close that Draco could smell the scent of bitter herbs on her breath. Fearing she meant to kiss him on the mouth, he fought the urge to pull away and slumped with relief when her lips brushed past his cheek to whisper in his ear.

"Oh, I'm sure you do. Of course you'd like it up there. Very well, pet, but do try not to be overly eager. We'll want enough of her left to send home to her father with our sympathies, don't you think?"

Draco stayed hunched among the sofa cushions long after Bellatrix had gone, wishing all he needed to improve in his study of the Dark Arts was the theory. When everything had been on parchment, it had all seemed so absurdly easy.

Theory didn't have a face and a name... It didn't leave its last fluttering heartbeat in the palm of his hand... It didn't look at him in weary sorrow as it slid further and further down a tower wall... Theory most definitely wasn't supposed to see him and nod.

He'd already proven himself a dismal failure as a murderer. Now, he was expected to torment a fey and foolish girl... and all for the sake of practice.

Now, it would have to matter.

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Veiled alliances had linked and advanced the noble fortunes of war for both Magical and Muggle houses during the Conquering. As his due from Guillaume de Normandie for services subtly applied, Draco's grand-sire, Corvus Malfoi, had laid claim nine generations prior to a vast expanse of Wiltonshire lands so that he might set his banners at Tollard. His penchant for building great estates and cultivating wealth was matched only by his abiding passion for magnificent birds. Some said that his affections for his wife, his sons, and his mistresses paled before those he held for his silver-bellied peregrines and merlins.

As the manor and the family name transformed to fit the fashion in generations hence, the position of falcon master to the Malfoys became highly coveted, not least for the comfortable accommodations that were provided. Only after Eridanus Malfoy, Draco's great-grandfather, showed his favor for ornamental birds over sporting ones had the tower suite stood empty. Peacocks did not require a master huntsman's hand, only directives that any half-witted elf could master. For his grandfather and his father, that had been a convenience. Draco's own birds were another matter.

As he lowered the wards, he noted that one of the elves had performed with the usual efficiency. The falconer's suite was perfectly tidied and arranged, a fire in the grate, the windows on all four sides left open to the outside air as he'd instructed. Warming charms kept the winter chill at bay but would allow sounds... certain sounds... to carry far over the snow-veiled countryside.

Each of the windows faced its compass point, aligning with Draco's fonder memories of home. To the east, he could see the pastured hills where he'd first learned to master the air, long before Madam Hooch had given him instruction. Far to the north, past the dormant orchards, lay the high Plain of Salisbury, heavy with the oldest mysteries of circle, stone and fire. To the south were the formal gardens and pristine sweeps of lawn that his mother had left abandoned when Death took up residence in her drawing room. And to the west, the moon would soon tangle in the silver skein of the Wylde, where he'd cast his first faltering *Lumos* on a soft summer night when he was only three.

Calling on any of those memories now was torture. They were a weakness that would see him dead.

Shedding his embroidered outer robes to roll the sleeves of his fine lawn shirt, Draco allowed his Mark to be fully visible. Lovegood needed to see. She was to be the guest of a Death Eater, and her welcome would be less than gracious.

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He had her brought from the cellar by his own chamber-elf. Rook would stay silent out of loyalty rather than fear. Theirs was a rare trust that Draco kept to himself. He'd rather Rook didn't go the way of Dobby.

Lovegood's feet were bare, and she stayed crouched precisely where she'd been left. That suited him well enough. There was an advantage to towering over her. If she stood, she might look him straight in the eye, and that wasn't something he wanted.

"You've managed to lose your shoes already, when you've only just arrived. Or were they stolen?" he mocked. "Be careful going about that way, Lovegood. Someone might mistake you for an impudent elf and punish you."

"I suppose, but I think you'd know which was which," Luna answered, straightening enough to settle cross-legged on the stone floor. She seemed to intend to make herself more comfortable. "I believe my shoes are still on the train." Busily chafing her feet to warm them, she glanced up as calmly as if she was in her House's common room. "How are you Draco? I suppose you're home for the holidays, aren't you? I'm sorry to have missed leaving a bit of Yule cake for the fair folk. It's best not to offend them."

Draco found it hard not to focus on those bare feet, looking so small and cold, like those of a child caught out of bed in the middle of the night. Only in the room two minutes... Why in hell did she make him feel as though he'd already lost the upper hand?

"That's the game you're thinking you'll play, Lovegood? Pretending you don't know why you're here?" He brought the poison in his voice to a low simmer of threat. "Use that supposed Ravenclaw wit and you'll sort it out. I can hurt you very badly when and how it suits me."

"Draco, you've made certain that I'd see your Mark first thing, so I'm sure someone is expecting quite a lot from you. I know I'm not here for gobstones, although I'm sure you play a cunning game." A sad smile crossed her face. "Someone is expecting quite a lot from all of us, aren't they? Do you think yours will mind if you don't succeed? They don't seem the sort to take disappointments especially well."

"Shut up," Draco seethed. "I haven't said you could speak to me or use my given name. Only people I care about do that, and you're not one."

Luna drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them tightly, looking up at him as if he were a curiosity she'd recently discovered.

"Will it make it easier for you, then, if I call you Malfoy? I don't especially like calling people by their last name only. That's not quite who they are. Perhaps I'll just say Draco Malfoy all at once, very quickly. Would that do?"

With a harsh bark of laughter, Draco reached down to grip the front of Luna's robes and drag her to her feet.

"God, how stupid are you really? Listen closely. You're here for me to practice curses on, everything short of the Killing Curse. By the time I've finished, I'm to leave you in your own piss and blood on the floor. That's what's expected of a well-trained young Death Eater, or hadn't you heard?"

He felt her shiver ever so slightly, but whether from the cold stones under her feet or from the first stirrings of fear, he wasn't certain. If it was the latter, then she had enough of her wits to recognize her circumstances. He'd rather she understood. Otherwise, standing there all pale and small, there was too much about her that reminded him of the birds he'd chosen for the Vanishing Cabinets. He didn't much care for the similarities.

"We're better than they are, Lovegood," Draco growled, giving Luna a rough shake. "You're pureblood, for god's sake. You have to know that anyone who's not is beneath us. If you'd admit to that, we wouldn't have to do this."

"We're not, actually. Just different," she answered. "But some of us seem to feel safer believing otherwise. It's all very odd to me."

"There's nothing odd about it. Purebloods behaving like savages...it's disgusting. I offered my hand to your blessed Potter before we ever got to Hogwarts. Did he ever tell you that? I imagine not." Even as he spat the words, Draco wondered why he wanted her to know. "That's what's done if you have any sense of tradition. You don't refuse, the way fucking Potter did. Even with someone you detest, you keep up appearances."

"And attack them later?" Luna asked, as if she found it perfectly natural having a discussion with a Death Eater's wand leveled at her heart.

"Yes, when there's a purpose," Draco countered. "Otherwise, you just keep them close enough to have an eye on them until they're useful."

With a sharp jab of his wand, he motioned for her to stand in front of the western window, so that the ragged nimbus of her hair was haloed in moonlight, her face a mosaic of shadow and light.

"You're beyond ridiculous, Lovegood," Draco drawled in the perfect imitation of his father. "How can you even think you'd understand my life when you're still skipping in corridors like some silly child? What a pathetic waste of magic you are."

"No more of a waste than a boy who's all dressed up in his father's robes." She turned her head at the tiny sound of candle wax dripping to the floor. "That's what's happening now, isn't it? You have a purpose for me."

"Something like," Draco said with a sneer.

His curse descended with no warning.

"Imperio."

Searching for a sense of detachment, he watched Luna's eyes slowly empty and her face become blank. For a moment, he wasn't quite sure if she'd actually gone under. She didn't look much different than when she'd drift off in the middle of a class to stare into dreams no one else could see.

Draco raised his hand. Once, twice... three times... his wand cut the air, writing the stinging and bruising hexes that would leave vivid wounds on Luna's pale cheeks and slender arms.

Her pain would be a nasty, searing thing that would burn for hours. When his father had begun to teach him how to duel in earnest, he'd felt enough of those hexes to know.

"Kneel, here, in front of me. You're not to move or make a sound until you're told."

Standing over her, Draco felt a trickle of sweat run down his back. She was just as he wanted her, and he could do precisely what he'd said...hurt her, and very badly, far worse than stings and bruises. He could destroy her. He should be feeling powerful... justified... Certainly something other than bone-tired and vaguely ill... By now, if it were Bellatrix doing the work, she'd already be smiling with satisfaction.

Behind a steadying breath, he sought some thread of inspiration. He'd taunted her for acting like a child, for being just a slip of a girl. That would do.

Draco spoke again, grateful there was no one to hear the uncertainty in his voice.

"I know you saw your mother die. Show me that."

As Lovegood slowly crumpled to the floor, sobbing with a little girl's broken gasps, tears washing down her cheeks, Draco watched. As carefully as he studied the texts of potions, he memorized her face.

"Stop. Everyone for miles can hear you. They'll think a banshee's loose."

Better, that time-no quiver in his voice.

When the elf came to lead her back to the cellar, Draco kept his back turned. He wanted no reason to care.

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Standing by the open window with Lovegood's small wrist tight in his grip, Draco could feel the breath of her screams against his skin. She didn't cry. He'd forbidden her that comfort.

The lightest brush of the *Cruciatus* was always enough to pull them from her, high and wavering. She'd never been hardened to pain. If she managed to survive, she would be, considering how this war was bound to turn out.

On the third day, when he released her, she steadied herself for a moment against the ledge, looking at him with something that seemed far too much like pity.

"Draco Malfoy, what were you like when you were small? Did you ever play?"

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"My mother knows about this, that you're brought up here, and she knows why. She's not going to ask me about the details. So long as this keeps us alive, she won't interfere, just in case you were thinking she might."

Draco wasn't quite sure why he'd begun to talk to her, but it seemed to happen whenever he knew Bellatrix was away.

Luna pulled at the rough blanket he'd allowed around her shoulders, wondering if she could keep him at it. There was always a fire in the falconry, but the chill of the cellars never seemed to leave her. The longer Draco stayed talking, the more chance of getting truly warm.

"There are beasts that will kill their own kits rather than let hunters have at them. First the kits and then themselves. It's a very sad thing, really." She ran the blanket hem through her fingers. "Do you think your mother would do that? Kill you to keep you away from the Aurors and out of Azkaban?"

"She's defied far worse because of me, so that's hardly an issue. Certainly not one I'd discuss with you. Besides, where's the need? This war is nearly won." Draco was almost amused that Lovegood had tried to touch a nerve.

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"What things do you miss from before? Tell me." Draco was sprawled gracelessly in a massive chair in the middle of the room, toying with a pair of jesses he'd found discarded in a drawer.

"You already know what you want me to say," Luna responded, keeping her eye on a small green spider that was making a valiant effort to cross the vast stone floor. She couldn't help but pity the poor thing, stranded on such a cold, unlovely plain. If she watched its tiny odyssey, maybe it would somehow know and feel a little braver. Maybe she would too.

"Tell me anyway. Buy yourself some time before we start," Draco answered with a sullen grunt.

"If I told you everything that I miss, I'd have about three days of peace from you," she murmured. Seeing Draco curl his fingers into tight fists, she hastily continued. "I miss warm bread and clean sheets. I miss the ways the elves chat with one another when they think no one is listening."

Ticking off each thing on her fingers, Luna stole a wary look at Draco. His posture seemed staged, unnatural, as if he wanted her to think he was merely bored. The fists said differently. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days, and if he had, it must have been in his robes. The skin around his eyes looked thin and raw, as if it would easily tear away from the bone beneath.

"I miss the way Hagrid makes dreadful tea and awful cakes. I miss the ink that Professor Snape uses for his marking. It's so very red. You always know exactly where you've gone wrong."

At the mention of Snape, Draco's fists clenched still tighter.

Luna kept her voice low and steady, hoping all would stay calm a little longer. She could hear Draco's breathing now, ragged and harsh against the soft hiss of the rain sheeting past the windows, bleeding the snow across the frozen ground.

"You want to hear how much I miss my mother because you know that hurts me, but she's in every breath I take. So unless you finally practice the Killing Curse on me, I'll keep breathing and she'll be with me."

The little spider was halfway across.

"My father, I miss awfully, and I worry for him. It wasn't meant, but you've done me a kindness, putting me in with Mr. Ollivander. He's far less lonely with me there, so it's as if my father's less lonely as well. I probably shouldn't tell you. You'll take that away from me, I suppose, but you did want to know."

When Draco didn't make a comment, she glanced up and saw that his storm-dark eyes were also fixed on the little spider.

"You must have been worried when your father was in Azkaban." Luna braced herself, wondering just which curse this would earn her.

"Where your lot put him? I don't think you really want to ask me that," Draco snarled. "My father's not your concern. He's back with us now, and he'll be given his proper place again, soon enough."

To Luna's ears, Draco's assured arrogance didn't ring quite true. So long as she wasn't suffering for it, she'd venture down this path a step or two farther and see where it led.

"The night I was brought here, I saw your mum standing next to you. She's very beautiful, but I don't suppose she's especially happy. I didn't see your father, though."

As quietly as possible, Luna settled back on her heels. She was on dangerous ground.

"If you must know, Azkaban's made things hardly bearable for him. He rarely leaves his rooms unless we're called to the Dark Lord," Draco answered, tightening his bloodless lips. "He studies me, when I see him, like he's staring into a mirror."

"Looking for his reflection in you," Luna affirmed.

"Yeah, well, I don't think I'll ask if he sees too much or too little of himself in me," Draco snapped.

Suddenly, he was on his feet, wand in hand. With a vicious jerk of his head, he ordered her to come away from the warmth of the fire and stand nearer the window. She felt oddly moved to see that he stepped around the spider, but he wasn't going to step around her. Not now. She'd opened a wound, and he was going to make her pay.

"You must miss him very much, even though he's right here with you. What else do you miss, Draco Malfoy?" she whispered, taking a deep breath.

When she fell beneath the sword of the *Cruciatus*, she saw pain on his face that was equal to hers.

"My birds. I miss my birds."

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The day he lashed her with *Sectumsempra* was the day she saw him cry.

He'd spoken the curse so softly, she'd not even heard. Swaying in shock, she watched her chest and arms dress themselves in crimson lace as the room began to fade into a quiet mist.

"What did you do? I don't understand... This doesn't hurt..."

"I know."

As her knees began to buckle, Luna thought the Veil must be muffling Draco's voice to make it sound as close to gentle as she'd ever heard it. "If you want to go through, say so. This can be over very fast if no one pulls you back. It's more like falling asleep."

"But that's not what I want... I need to be alive..." she whimpered.

"Then be quiet."

His voice as he chanted her healing was husky, a young man's tenor newly found, perhaps a bit off-key. She found it rather pleasant to drift on its current for a while and listen to its music, even when a vial was placed to her lips and the taste of iron filled her mouth. Some deep instinct assured her she'd been potioned not poisoned, and she lay still... until she felt the warmth of his hand near her breast.

Desperate to cover herself, suddenly sick with fear, she tried to gather the tatters of her robe with a trembling hand.

"So, now you're afraid of me?" Draco said with an empty laugh. "You needn't be, not for that. I don't do rape, Lovegood. That's Greyback. He rather fancies it."

If she'd the strength...or the courage...to open her eyes, she would have seen how very pale he was, how his own hands were shaking as he muttered a charm.

"Consuo."

She might have thanked him. She couldn't quite recall as she drifted at the edge of a fragile awareness.

Her blood was almost dry on Draco's fine white shirt when he started his story. Whether he thought she could hear him didn't seem to be the point.

"My family's always kept birds...hawks, falcons, the damn peacocks. I had fourteen racing homers, one for each star in my constellation. Got them as hatchlings, barely out of the nest...all of them descended from the Voyageurs. Father said if I was going to tie myself to any creature, I had to know its strengths and weaknesses, so whenever I was home, I'd take care of them myself, train them. The rest of the time, it was Rook. Me and an elf, tending to pigeons. Imagine telling that to your bloody Gryffs.

"That's pretty much what I'd do in the summers...race my birds. Mother would just about have fits if I raced them too late in the day, because I'd go up with them to get them all back safely. That's dangerous. Greg and Vince couldn't even stand me when I was training. They're not much for patience.

"My birds... they wouldn't fly with me after... once I'd been Marked. Rook said they were afraid of me. He punished himself half to death for saying it. Maybe he shouldn't have. He was probably right. They had more sense than you do, Lovegood. They knew enough to be afraid.

"They're all gone. Maybe you noticed how empty this tower is. The morning after Dumbledore... I was summoned. The Dark Lord was standing here, in the middle of this room, with my parents kneeling on either side of Him and my birds in a heap at His feet, stupefied so they couldn't fly. Nagini was right over there in that corner.

"I was ordered to kill my birds that morning, every one of them, even the nesting ones. I broke their necks with my hands because He said The Boy Who Failed His Master had no right to use a wand for something so unimportant. He made me feed them to that wretched snake, one at a time. Asked me if I thought they were enough to curb her appetite or should we offer her something more satisfying. Looking right at my mother, He asked my father and me for our opinion... our fucking opinion....

"I saw Thestrals that day. First time... Two of them, gray as fog. They were outside our gates, just standing there, looking towards this tower. I'd never seen one anywhere before, but I saw them that day. Not for Dumbledore. Your lot probably had a whole bloody herd for him. These two were mine, for my birds."

When he began to cry, Luna rolled onto her side and reached out for his hand. When Rook came to take her back, Draco was still holding on.

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"What will you do when this is over?" she asked, sipping painfully from the cup of water he'd left within reach of her trembling hand.

"Go back to Hogwarts and wait for something to happen, I suppose." Draco scowled, tracking the beads of water that trickled down her arm as she drank. They looked like tears, exactly like the ones he still demanded of her before he would release her back to the cellar.

"No." She shook her head. "You're not understanding my question." Luna's unoccupied hand did an odd little dance that somehow linked the two of them, the room, and everything that was between them, in a gesture so vivid with her magic that Draco almost reached for his wand. "Not these few days in this room. They hardly matter. What will you do when the war is over? That's what matters."

"Me?" He snorted. "Rule the world, of course. You can be my servant."

"You've enough of those," she replied. "You'd do better with a friend."

"I don't have friends. I have alliances. Answer my question. What will you do when we've won? I doubt the Dark Lord will have much use for you."

"Find another way," she answered.

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When Rook appeared at dawn to put his tiny hand on Luna's elbow and take her away, he dared to speak.

"Young Sir is having instructions for me?" he croaked, a hint of eager hope in his rheumy eyes.

In the thin morning light of the eastern window, Draco stood as straight and slender as a birch, his black robes shining as darkly as crows' wings. A well-used broom, devoid of show, leaned against the wall, waiting.

"A little of the Dreamless in the water jug, Rook. She's to sleep."

He listened carefully for the sound of her leaving, but his back stayed turned.

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He should have struck her for touching him, for wrapping her hands around his. The fact that she'd done so before, he'd written off as merely the insanity of blood loss. Bellatrix would have left her without arms for daring to do it again.

"God, you really are out of your feeble mind. Why in bloody hell are you handing me a rock?"

"It's one I found in your cellar," Luna replied with a soft clap of her hands. "I'd call it more of a stone than a rock, since it's polished so nicely from the water that drips down the walls, and you might notice the small groove that's just right to fit the pad of your thumb. I thought you might want to keep it."

"What's it meant for, chucking at wayward Nifflers?" Draco smirked.

"Oh no, they're far too quick to let themselves be hit with a stone. It's meant to be a worry stone in times of difficulty and trouble. You might find it helpful."

"You may have noticed that I have this?" He brandished the arm that bore his Mark. "Far more helpful than your rock, I'd say."

Luna shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't think so. I know you're trying very hard to be proud of your Mark, but I don't think it's going to be much comfort when you're alone and afraid for yourself and your family."

"I think I've actually succeeded in breaking you, Lovegood," Draco responded, gripping her hard by the shoulders. "In the name of Merlin's wand, why else would you offer a gift to a Death Eater?"

"Because Draco Malfoy needs it," she answered.

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"Does it hurt, your Mark? I see you flinch quite a bit. Is that because of Him or something else?"

By now, Luna's voice was a scrap of whisper, ragged and painful from the tears and screams his curses had pulled from her.

"Yeah, Lovegood, it's Him. If you ever get the chance, you can tell Potter that the Ferret's in pain most of the time. I got a little extra something added after Dumbledore, all right?" Sitting on the window ledge, Draco was tracing runes of smoke in the air with his wand.

They each kept to their thoughts for a while.

"You seem to fit much better up here, you know," she ventured. "As if you'd be content to stay always."

"Gazing out over my lordly estates?" he answered with a smirk.

"Actually, I was thinking more about you flying from up here," she replied.

The comment was made so gently that Draco stilled his wand and swung his legs around on the ledge so that he could face her.

"And there you have it, Ravenclaw. You're quite right. This is a good spot to launch from if you know just how to read the winds. Otherwise, you'll end up dead on the rocks instead of climbing to the top of the sky." Behind the pride in his voice, there was the echo of chances forever lost.

"Is that what you're trying to do, Draco Malfoy? Read the winds?"

"Yeah, Lovegood, and so far I'm still in the air."

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"When I asked you, in the beginning, you never gave me an answer. Did you?"

He'd allowed her nearer the fire, and Luna was making every effort to absorb the warmth into her body, to bring it back to the cellars with her.

"Did I what? Know how easy it would be to curse you?" Draco snapped. "I suspected, yeah. You haven't disappointed me. Not quite a pool of piss and blood, but it'll do."

Tracing the thread of a silver scar on the back of her hand, Luna ignored the bait.

"I asked you what you were like when you were small, whether you ever played."

Draco paused in the middle of the room, towering over her.

"Merlin's robes, of course I played. I had every toy and amusement a child could ask for."

Ten days, and they'd come back full circle.

"Oh, I've no doubt of that. But did you ever play?" Luna's tone was insistent. "You know...climb trees, jump in puddles, chase the peacocks, hide from your elfanny? That sort of thing?"

Draco's long legs carried him from window to window in an endless circle of pacing. Bloody hell, he'd lost the upper hand... again.

"Hills," he muttered. "I rolled down hills. I'd sneak out before dawn and climb the highest one around and roll down as fast as I possibly could so that I'd be completely confused and out of breath at the bottom. And then I'd stand up, all dizzy and half sick, and pretend I'd Apparated. I'd ruin my robes, get dirt in my hair, and bruise myself up like crazy. Maman would spoil me the rest of the day. My father would pretend he was disgusted with me for behaving like a troll. So yes, I played. Happy now?"

"Yes, I believe I am," Luna replied with a nod. "When I'm old, if I ever think of you hurting me, I'll remember that instead."

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Two days later, Draco returned to Hogwarts with the worry stone in his pocket. In the night, when children were weeping in pain and no one came to soothe them, he reached to hold it in his hand and rub his thumb across the shallow groove. He made very sure that no one knew.

At Easter, he retreated as often as he could to the falconer's suite. Luna stayed in the cellar. He never asked to have her brought to him.

Instead, Potter came... and the world spun backwards.

With the blood that was running into his eyes, Draco hadn't been sure until much later that she was gone.

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The winter had been mild in the Scottish Borders, as if it had taken pity on the weary war-torn world. What snow had come had been more a quilt than a blanket, always letting patches of slumbering heath show through. The spring that followed promised to be as kind.

Luna was hanging her chimes to lure the knotweaver birds away from her seedlings when she saw him on the road. It pleased her to see that he was walking. Not sauntering or strutting, just... walking. A bit slowly perhaps, maybe even with reluctance, but still, he was coming ahead. That, she thought, was a good sign.

She met him at the gate.

He'd gotten taller in the past year, grown into the last bit of his height. Thin, as well, but not from the elegant build of his Malfoy blood. The lack of more than a few meals was most likely the cause. There was a tracing of faint lines at the corners of his mouth that spoke of things remembered. That was a mark he could stand to carry. The other Mark wasn't visible, but one didn't ask that sort of question too quickly.

"You've let your hair grow longer," she said, thinking to herself how much he'd begun to mirror his father.

"Magister Snape says I look like a mop," he answered, turning away so that his profile was curtained.

"We hear that the professor is getting stronger every day. I'm very glad of that." She smiled. "Will you study with him when he's well?"

"Magister. He doesn't care to be called Professor, now that he's not at Hogwarts. The Ministry's putting me on academic probation with him. They need him for a war hero, but they can still punish him with me."

"Your mother? How is she? Is she well?" Courtesy and tradition, proper behavior...

"Maman is safe. She's gone to stay with Aunt Meda for a while, where she won't be accosted by people with a grievance against us," he answered. "There's Teddy to dote on, so she's far happier than she's been for quite a while. And she doesn't have to be alone so much."

Luna noticed the affectionate endearments and smiled to herself. Bellatrix had never been Aunt Bella.

"And your father?" she carefully nudged.

From the look of relief that flickered across his face, she knew he was grateful that she'd asked.

"Another year and they'll release him. All this hair's for him, really. They shaved his head when they took him away. For cleanliness, supposedly, but we knew it was to shame him."

A memory stirred in his eyes, and he turned his face away.

"I'll keep mine long until we bring him home. Maybe I'll keep it after, as well. Tradition, you know. A way for the heir to honor his father's place in the family."

In the lift of his head, Luna could see a bit of the old arrogance. It didn't trouble her so much. Still, there was no mention of why he'd come. Perhaps the only thing to do was just keep asking the smaller questions.

"Do they let you fly?" Perhaps not such a small question, that one.

"If my Gatherer is with me," he replied, the twist of a grimace setting his mouth in a thin line. "He's brilliant on a broom, so it's not so bad. There's an old pitch we use, over near Melksham."

"I'm very glad you've managed to stay in the air, Draco Malfoy." Luna lifted her arms in an imitation of wings. "Astoria Greengrass lives near there. Did you know her? She must have lived fairly close to you... before. We've just become friends, working together at the Thestral sanctuary, so we might come and watch you."

"Daphne's little sister?" He frowned. "I remember her being skinny and annoying. She'd pester me for feathers from the peacocks so she could make something from them, god only knows what." Lowering his eyes, he suddenly seemed to find his boots highly interesting. "She could come, I guess, if you don't think she'd be bored. It's just flying."

Even though he was ragged, Luna could see that hardship had made him far more handsome. Astoria would certainly not be bored. As dryad-lovely as she was these days, Draco probably wouldn't find her annoying, either.

Pondering on that, Luna let her thoughts drift to hand-fastings and children. It would be so nice to celebrate such things again.

"I have two yearling birds I'm training... Ceyx and Alcyone, like the myth."

The quiet triumph in Draco's voice was beautiful. Luna held her breath to listen and pay attention.

"They're small, not as fast as some of my others were, but they're smart and they've got heart. Muggle bloke in the village gave them to me because he didn't really want to cull them from his batch. Soft-hearted old geezer, loves his birds far too much. We get along all right."

Hearing that, Luna froze, waiting for the earth to swallow them both. When the moment passed and nothing quite so drastic happened, she chose to move on.

"Brave birds? You'll want to race them wearing Gryffindor bands then?" she teased.

"Hades, no, Lovegood, didn't I say they're smart as well? Slytherins, without question." A smirk made a fleeting dash across his face.

She'd begun to ponder the merits of pigeon feather earrings when the weariness in Draco's voice brought her back.

"I'm supposed to ask forgiveness of seven people, confess my sins. The Ministry chose six of them for me. They've let me choose the seventh."

"That must have been hard to get through. Should I ask who the six were?" Luna suddenly remembered the old feeling of being on dangerous ground.

"No. You shouldn't." Luna recognized the intent in Draco's voice. "Let's just say I did it and leave it at that."

And that tone, too. Expectations had been met, then.

"You don't need to ask forgiveness from me, Draco," she said.

"Look, Lovegood, can you just let me do this before you go skipping off somewhere?" he sighed. "Last year, when you... I told you Slytherins have a purpose for everything. We use whatever can benefit us. I wasn't going to suffer or let my parents suffer, just so you wouldn't."

"I knew that," Luna said.

"It didn't mean I wasn't ashamed," Draco whispered.

"I knew that as well."

Very deliberately, Draco settled onto the stone bench beside the gate, putting himself lower than Luna so that he would be forced to look up at her.

"It was better that it was me and not Bellatrix. I had to have something to show her if I was going to make it out alive. You fit my purpose. What I needed, I took, but I always stopped in time. Bellatrix wouldn't have, not until she'd driven you mad or killed you. As it turns out, I'm pretty damn good at Occlumency. I gave her what she expected of me, Luna, and you didn't interest her enough to matter. She left you and Ollivander alone, didn't she?"

"Yes," Luna answered, "she did. She never came for us. I wondered at first why not, but I had time to sort it. Very Slytherin of you."

"I was glad that you made it out," Draco offered.

"I was sorry that you couldn't," Luna replied.

"Yeah, well, I'm out now, but I should go before my Gatherer starts looking for me. I have to be back before sunset." One slender hand, showing the first scars of a potioner, crept into his pocket. "I thought maybe you'd want to have this back."

The cellar pebble lay on his palm.

"I'd rather you kept it." Luna shook her head. "It doesn't need to be a worry stone now, Draco Malfoy. It could be your starting stone. Whenever you're at odds, you can hold onto it and remember that you're starting again and it's going to be better."

With an almost-smile, he stood, sliding the stone back safely into his pocket as he turned to leave.

"Draco?" Luna called, laughing as she pushed the gate open towards him.

She could almost hear the flutter of wings... The wanting to fly... The wanting to stay...

"You need to answer to that, you know, because that's what I intend to call you from now on. Draco. Just Draco. There's a lovely long hill behind the house, where the stones have been cleared and the new grass has just come in. You have a little time. Would you like to try it? I expect I'll beat you to the bottom."

