
HARRY POTTER
AND THE
SERPENT'S HEART
SENSURROUND Q. CATGIRL

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A Note from the Author

You'll probably notice that I've changed a few things.

Events happen at different times than they did in J. K. Rowling's original books. Some things happen differently, and some things don't happen at all. Don't let that confuse you.

This is intentional.

You might also notice that some of your favorite scenes from the original books are missing entirely. That's intentional, too. I'm not trying to rewrite the entire Harry Potter series, and I'm certainly not trying to improve upon it.

At its heart, this is a story about two people, their relationship, and how they change each other. The larger events of the wizarding world are still

happening around them, but they're not necessarily the focus. Sometimes those events have been rearranged, abbreviated, or left out entirely to make room for the story I actually wanted to tell.

This whole thing originally began as a random writing experiment. I had an idea, decided to see where it went, and never really expected anyone else to care.

To my considerable surprise, people did.

The encouragement and enthusiasm I received inspired me to keep writing, and what started as a little experiment eventually grew into something much larger than I ever intended.

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

A Note About the Artwork

All illustrations in this book were generated using ChatGPT.

Why? Because I'm writing fan fiction, giving it away for free, and unfortunately do not possess the sort of disposable income required to commission talented human artists to illustrate an entire novel. I would love to be able to do that someday.

Until then, I have a computer, an imagination, and an artificial intelligence that has been remarkably patient with my increasingly ridiculous artistic demands.

Please enjoy the pictures.

A novel set in the **Catgirl Extended Universe (CEU)** of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter.

The "Catgirl Extended Universe" (CEU) is an alternate continuity of Harry Potter fan fiction in which events, character developments, and changes to established lore carry forward from one story to another.

For Dogboy:

The fun I had creating these stories with you made every moment worthwhile, even if nobody else ever reads a single word.

Prologue

The Looking Glass of Possibilities



Albus Dumbledore was bored. This was an unusual state of affairs for the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who ordinarily had more than enough to occupy his time. There were disciplinary reports to review, letters from the Ministry to ignore, and a particularly unpleasant dispute involving Peeves, three Hufflepuffs, and a quantity of treacle that nobody had yet satisfactorily explained.

Dumbledore had decided that all of these matters could wait.

Instead, he sat behind his desk, examining an ancient magical artifact known as *the Looking Glass of Possibilities*.

It was a curious object. Unlike the Mirror of Erised, which showed people what they most desired, the Looking Glass revealed worlds in which history had unfolded differently. Every choice, every accident, every improbable coincidence had the potential to create an entirely different reality.

Dumbledore found the possibilities fascinating. He also found them rather entertaining.

He peered into the glass.

A young Harry Potter appeared, sitting at the Slytherin table. Dumbledore watched for several moments. Harry was wearing green and silver robes and arguing with a young Draco Malfoy, his best friend, about Quidditch.

"Boring." Dumbledore muttered.

He stirred his wand through the glass as though it were a particularly stubborn cup of tea.

The image dissolved. Another appeared.

Harry Potter and Hermione Granger stood beneath a flowering tree, holding hands.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Ah! Now that's more like it."

He watched for a moment longer. "Frankly, that's how it should have been."

He stirred the glass again.

This time, Harry Potter appeared in the arms of Draco Malfoy. They were kissing. Passionately. Dumbledore stared. He blinked.

"Oh, not *again* ."

Fawkes looked up from his perch.

"How many times must I watch these two fall in love?"

Fawkes gave a sharp, disapproving squawk. Dumbledore turned angrily toward the Phoenix. "What??"

Fawkes squeaked loudly at him.

Dumbledore looked offended. "CERTAINLY NOT!" he said, loudly.

The phoenix tilted his head at Dumbledore.

"Don't you give me that look!" Dumbledore scolded. I have absolutely nothing against two young men falling in love. In fact, it can be a beautiful story."

Fawkes just stared at Dumbledore.

"I've just seen it HUNDREDS of times in *The Looking Glass* . One time, they are secretly in love. In another, they are married. In yet another, they start a bakery in Hogsmeade!"

Fawkes gave Dumbledore a soft trill in response.

"Yes, the bakery was charming. That's not the point!"

Dumbledore gestured toward the Looking Glass. "An infinite number of possible realities, Fawkes! Infinite! Surely somewhere out there is something a little more original!"

The phoenix regarded him skeptically.

Dumbledore sighed. "Oh, don't look at me like that. You know perfectly well what I mean."

Dumbledore stirred the glass with his wand again.

There was Lucius Malfoy, standing in Madam Malkin's robe shop. Beside him stood a young girl. She had long, platinum-blonde hair, an aristocratic bearing, and the unmistakable expression of someone who had already decided that most of the world was beneath her.

Dumbledore frowned. "Well, well." He examined the image more closely.

Lucius was speaking to the shopkeeper. The little girl was examining a set of expensive dress robes with obvious approval. Lucius left for some other errands.

The door opened again. A small, dark-haired boy entered.

Harry Potter.

The girl turned. Their eyes met.

Dumbledore leaned forward. "Ohhhh."

Harry said something. The girl responded.

Dumbledore began to smile. "Oh, this is *interesting* ." He settled deeper into his chair. "Lucius Malfoy has a daughter instead of a son." He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And young Harry Potter appears to have made quite an impression."

In the glass, the girl tossed her hair and turned away. Harry watched her go, looking thoroughly bewildered.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Now THIS... This is not something I expected." He reached for a tin of lemon drops.

"Now then. Let's see where this goes." He popped a sweet into his mouth. The Looking Glass shimmered.

Year 1

The Robe Shop



Harry had been in Diagon Alley for less than an hour and had already decided that the wizarding world was absolutely brilliant.

It was also completely mad.

There were shops selling cauldrons. Shops selling owls. Shops selling things in jars that Harry had deliberately avoided looking at too closely. He had money (an astonishing amount of money, apparently) and somewhere there was a school waiting for him where people did magic on purpose instead of accidentally making people's clothing shrink.

And now he learned he needed robes.

Hagrid had left him at "Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions" while he went to fetch something to eat.

"Won't be but a minute, Harry. You get yerself measured up."

Harry had been slightly nervous about being left alone. Then he'd gone inside and seen the girl. She was standing on a stool in front of a mirror while a witch knelt beside her, pinning the hem of a black Hogwarts robe. She was about Harry's age. Maybe a little taller, although the stool made it difficult to tell. Her hair was almost white, long and perfectly straight, falling over her shoulders while another attendant tried to keep it out of the way.

Harry had never seen hair quite like it.

"Not there."

The attendant stopped.

"Sorry, dear?"

"The pin." The girl pointed impatiently. "It's pulling."

"Oh. Of course." The woman adjusted it.

The girl inspected herself in the mirror. "No. Now the other side is uneven."

Harry frowned. He wasn't entirely certain it was.

The attendant patiently adjusted it again. "Better?"

The girl tilted her head. "A little."

Harry decided almost immediately that she was horrible.

Then she turned slightly and Harry saw her properly. He stared. He didn't mean to. It just sort of happened.

She was... Well. Harry didn't really know. "Pretty" seemed like the wrong word somehow. Aunt Petunia called actresses "pretty." Dudley occasionally called girls on television "fit" when he thought his mother couldn't hear.

Harry didn't know what he thought, but he definitely thought something. He just knew that the strange pale girl with the almost-white hair was suddenly very difficult not to look at.

"Don't bunch it there." she said.

The attendant took a breath. "I'm only trying to..."

"I know what you're trying to do. You're doing it incorrectly."

Harry's fascination diminished slightly. Definitely horrible.

Madam Malkin appeared from behind a curtain. "Hogwarts too, dear?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"First year?"

"Yeah."

"Stand up here, then."

A second stool had been placed several feet from the girl's. Harry climbed onto it. A measuring tape immediately began moving around him by itself.

Harry jumped. Madam Malkin laughed. "First time?"

Harry nodded.

"Don't worry. It won't bite."

Harry watched the tape wrap itself around his chest. This was brilliant.

The girl looked at him. Harry looked away. A moment later, he looked back. She was still watching the mirror. Harry stared at her hair again. Then her face.

She turned. Harry snapped his eyes forward. He looked sideways. She was staring directly at him.

"What?"

Harry nearly lost his balance. "Nothing."

The girl's eyes narrowed. "You were staring at me."

"No, I wasn't."

"You were."

"I was looking at the mirror."

"The mirror is behind me."

"Yeah."

"Which means you were looking at me."

Harry couldn't think of a response to that. The girl turned fully toward him. She seemed prepared to say something unpleasant. Her chin lifted slightly. "You really shouldn't..."

Harry looked at her. She looked back. Something strange happened to her face.

The superior expression disappeared, but only for a second. Her eyes moved over Harry's face, stopped at his scar, then returned to his eyes. Then his hair.

Harry suddenly became extremely conscious of his hair. He'd tried flattening it that morning. It hadn't helped.

The girl opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Harry waited.

"I..." She blinked.

Harry had the peculiar impression that whatever she'd planned to say had fallen straight out of her head.

She seemed to remember herself. Her shoulders straightened. "My name is Dracena Malfoy." The name was delivered with the air of someone who expected it to mean something.

Harry waited. Dracena waited. Apparently he was supposed to react. He didn't.

Something resembling disappointment flickered across her face. "Malfoy." she repeated.

"Right."

"You haven't heard of my family?"

"No."

That seemed to astonish her. "Really?"

"Really."

"Are you Muggle-born?"

Harry had heard Hagrid use the word *Muggle* twenty minutes earlier. He wasn't entirely sure what it meant.

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so?"

"My parents were wizards."

Dracena relaxed slightly. "Oh."

"Well, what's your name?"

"Harry."

"Harry what?"

"Potter."

This time Dracena really did stare.

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "What?"

"Harry Potter?"

"Yeah."

" ***The*** Harry Potter?"

Harry sighed. Apparently this was going to happen a lot.

"I suppose."

Dracena looked at his forehead again. Harry's hair had fallen partly over the scar. She leaned slightly to one side, trying to see it. Harry leaned the other way. She leaned farther.

Harry frowned. "Could you not?"

Dracena immediately straightened. "I wasn't doing anything."

"You were staring."

"I was looking at your hair."

Harry stared at her. Dracena's cheeks turned slightly pink. She seemed to realize what she'd said.

"Your scar." she corrected quickly. "I was looking for your scar."

"Oh."

"Everyone knows about it."

"I didn't."

That stopped her again.

"You didn't know about your own scar?"

"I knew I had a scar. Not that everyone knows about it?"

Dracena stared at him.

Harry was beginning to enjoy doing that to her.

"So you really don't know anything?"

"I know things."

"About our world."

Harry's enjoyment faded. "Not much."

Dracena considered him with an expression Harry couldn't quite read. It wasn't contempt exactly. If anything, she looked fascinated.

"That's very strange." She said.

"Thanks."

"I didn't mean..."

The shop door opened. "Harry!" Harry immediately recognized the booming voice. Hagrid ducked his enormous head through the doorway. "Yeh nearly done?"

Madam Malkin looked over. "Just a few more minutes."

"Right! Thought I'd grab us summat ter eat. Yeh like pasties, Harry?"

"I don't know."

Hagrid laughed. "Well, we'll find out!" He disappeared again, the bell over the door jingling violently behind him.

Harry smiled. When he turned back, Dracena was staring at the door.

"What?"

She looked at Harry. "What *was* that?"

Harry's smile disappeared. "That was Hagrid."

"Yes, I gathered it had a name."

Harry frowned. Dracena didn't notice.

"Why do you have such a brutish servant?"

Harry's fascination with her suffered another considerable setback. "He's not my servant."

Dracena blinked. "Then why is he carrying things for you?"

"Because he's helping me."

"Why?"

Harry stared at her. "Because he's nice?"

Dracena looked genuinely puzzled by this explanation.

"He's the groundskeeper at Hogwarts."

Her expression went from puzzled to utterly bewildered. "The groundskeeper?"

"Yeah."

"At Hogwarts?"

"Yes."

"And he's accompanying you through Diagon Alley?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Harry hesitated. That was considerably harder to explain. "Because he came to get me."

Dracena stared. "The Hogwarts groundskeeper came to collect you personally?"

Harry suddenly felt defensive. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't get my letters."

"What letters?"

"My Hogwarts letters."

"How could you not get them?"

"My aunt and uncle wouldn't let me read them."

Dracena's face changed. "Why not?"

"I don't know. They don't like magic."

She stared at him as though he'd just announced that his relatives didn't believe in shoes.

"They're Muggles?"

"Yeah."

"But you said your parents were wizards."

"They were."

"Were?"

Harry's stomach tightened. "They died."

Dracena stopped. Harry had already learned that this was another thing people reacted strangely to.

"Oh." For once she didn't seem to know what to say. "I'm sorry."

Harry looked at her. There wasn't anything snobbish in her face now. Just an eleven-year-old girl who had realized she'd stumbled onto something painful.

"Thanks."

Then Dracena's brow furrowed. "So you've been living with Muggles who hate magic, you didn't know Hogwarts existed, and they prevented you from receiving your letters?"

"Pretty much."

"And Hogwarts sent the *groundskeeper* ?"

Harry shrugged. "He's nice."

"That's not the point!"

Harry almost laughed. "What's the point?"

"The point is..."

"All finished, dear."

Dracena looked down.

The attendant had stepped back from her robes.

"Oh."

Madam Malkin smiled pleasantly. "If you'd just step down, we'll have these wrapped for you."

Dracena stepped off the stool.

Harry watched.

He couldn't help it.

She caught him again. This time she didn't accuse him of staring. Instead she smoothed the front of her dress and tried very hard to look as though she hadn't noticed. Madam Malkin handed her the package.

"There you are."

"Thank you."

It was the first time Harry had heard her thank anyone in the shop. The attendant looked mildly surprised too.

Dracena walked toward the door and looked back at Harry.

"Harry Potter."

"Dracena Malfoy."

She smiled. It wasn't the superior little smile she'd worn earlier. This one seemed to escape before she could stop it.

"I suppose I'll see you at Hogwarts."

"Suppose so."

"Try to learn something before then."

Harry frowned. "There it is."

"What?"

"You were almost nice."

Dracena looked offended. "I *was* nice."

"You were." Harry smiled. "Then you ruined it."

She glared at him. Harry grinned. Strangely, Dracena grinned back.

"Goodbye, Potter."

"Bye, Malfoy."

She opened the door. Harry expected her to leave. Instead she turned around.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Why did the groundskeeper have to come and get you?"

Harry opened his mouth.

"Miss Malfoy." Madam Malkin was still smiling pleasantly, but there was something in the smile now that suggested she had reached the absolute limit of her patience. "Your robes are finished."

"Oh."

Dracena glanced toward the door, then back at Harry.

"But..."

"Your mother is waiting."

Dracena sighed. "Fine."

She stepped outside. The door closed.

Harry watched through the window as that pale head disappeared into the crowd. Madam Malkin's measuring tape tightened around his waist.

Harry jumped.

"Stand still, dear."

"Sorry."

Harry tried.

"Madam Malkin?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Are all Witches like that?"

She laughed. Harry wasn't sure why.

He looked toward the window again. Dracena was gone. That was probably for the best.

She was rude. Spoiled. Bossy. She treated shop attendants like servants. She'd called Hagrid brutish. She apparently thought everyone ought to know who her family was.

Harry didn't like her. He was quite certain of that. A minute later, the bell jingled and Hagrid returned carrying a paper bag large enough to feed six people.

"All done, Harry?"

"Almost."

"Meet anyone?"

Harry looked toward the window one more time. "Sort of."

"Nice?"

Harry thought about it. "No." Then he thought about white-blonde hair, a momentary stutter, and the strange way she'd smiled at him before leaving. Harry frowned. "Maybe."

Hagrid raised an eyebrow.

Harry shrugged. "I dunno."

The Hogwarts Express



By the time the train had properly left London, Harry had decided that Ron Weasley was all right.

This was an enormous relief. Harry hadn't had many friends before. Dudley had made sure of that. Children at school had learned that being friendly with Harry meant being unfriendly with Dudley, and Dudley was considerably larger.

Ron didn't know any of this. More importantly, Ron didn't seem to care.

He was lanky, red-haired, slightly awkward, and one of so many children that his mother occasionally got their names wrong. He knew enormous amounts about the wizarding world that Harry didn't, but unlike the pale girl in Madam Malkin's, Ron didn't seem to think Harry was strange for not knowing them.

Mostly he seemed delighted to be the one explaining things.

"So they really don't move?"

Harry looked at the Chocolate Frog card. "Photographs?"

"Yeah."

"No." Harry replied. "They don't."

Ron looked horrified. "They just stand there?"

"Sometimes they smile."

"That's creepy."

Harry laughed. "No, people walking out of photographs is creepy."

"That's normal."

"Not where I grew up."

Ron considered this. "Huh." was all he managed to say.

They had been sharing sweets for perhaps twenty minutes when the compartment door opened. A girl with a great deal of brown hair stood outside. "Has either of you seen a toad?"

Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked at Harry.

"No." Harry said.

"A boy named Neville has lost one."

"Oh."

The girl looked around the compartment as though the toad might be hiding behind Harry's head. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Harry Potter."

Her eyes widened. Harry braced himself.

"Oh."

She looked at his forehead, then, mercifully, she looked away again. "I've read about you."

"Everyone keeps saying that."

Hermione seemed to realize she'd embarrassed him. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Harry said, looking at the floor.

Ron introduced himself.

Hermione stayed. Harry wasn't entirely sure how that happened. She asked what they'd bought in Diagon Alley. Ron mentioned spells. Hermione immediately informed them she'd already tried several simple ones and had been practicing before school.

Ron rolled his eyes. Harry asked what she'd managed to do.

Hermione brightened. Within minutes she was explaining something about wand movements while Ron argued that she couldn't possibly know whether she'd done it properly because she'd never seen anyone else perform the spell.

Harry listened to both of them. It was comfortable. Strangely comfortable. Nobody was trying to impress anyone.

Harry liked it. The compartment door opened again.

This time Harry looked up, and forgot what Ron had been saying, because Dracena Malfoy stood in the doorway. She had changed into her Hogwarts

robes. Her pale hair fell over the black fabric in a way Harry thought looked...

Well, he wasn't sure what it looked like. He just stared. Again.

Dracena stared back. Again.

There was a moment when neither said anything.

Ron noticed.

Hermione definitely noticed.

Dracena recovered first. "Potter."

Harry blinked. "Malfoy."

The corner of her mouth rose. "I thought that was you."

Two girls stood behind Dracena, along with a rather heavy boy Harry didn't recognize. They all looked at Harry with considerable curiosity.

Dracena, however, was looking only at him. "I was wondering where you'd got to."

"You were?"

She hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Obviously."

Harry smiled. Dracena's eyes narrowed.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"Looking at me."

"I'm looking at the door."

"I'm standing in the door."

"Right."

Ron snorted.

Dracena glanced at him. Her expression changed. "You're a Weasley."

Ron immediately stiffened. "Yeah."

"I thought so." There was something about the way she said it that Harry didn't like.

Dracena looked at Hermione. "And you are?"

"Hermione Granger."

Dracena waited. Hermione waited back.

"Granger." Dracena repeated.

"Yes."

"What family?"

Hermione frowned. "My family."

One of the girls behind Dracena giggled.

Hermione's face reddened. Dracena looked confused rather than amused.

"Your parents. Who are they?"

"They're dentists."

Dracena blinked. "Dentists?"

"They look after people's teeth."

"I know what a dentist is."

"Oh."

Dracena's eyes narrowed. Hermione said nothing.

"They're Muggles, then?"

"Yes."

Something clicked into place for Dracena. "Ah."

Harry recognized that *ah* . He didn't like that either.

Dracena returned her attention to him. "Anyway, Potter, I came to find you." Harry felt an inexplicable little jump somewhere in his stomach.

"You did?"

"Yes."

She stepped into the compartment. "I thought you might like to sit with us."

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. "I'm all right here."

Dracena seemed not to have anticipated this answer. "Well, yes. Obviously. But you don't know anyone yet."

"I know them." Ron smiled. Hermione did too.

Dracena frowned. "You met them today."

"I met you once."

"That's different."

"Why?"

Dracena opened her mouth, then stopped. She tried to speak again. "Because I'm a Malfoy."

Harry stared. "Right."

Dracena waited. Harry still had no idea what he was supposed to do with that information.

She sighed. "Potter, you said yourself you don't know anything about our world."

"Thanks."

"I don't mean it as an insult."

"It sounds like one."

Dracena's composure slipped. "Would you stop being difficult for five seconds?"

Harry grinned. "There she is."

Dracena glared. Then, despite herself, almost smiled. She suppressed it.

"I'm trying to help you."

"Help me with what?"

"Everything." She gestured vaguely toward the train, Hogwarts, and seemed to imply the entire wizarding world beyond it. "You don't know the families. You don't know how things work. You don't know who anyone is."

"That's true."

"Exactly."

Dracena brightened.

Harry had finally understood.

"There are people at Hogwarts you should know, Potter. Important people. Good families. People who could help you."

Harry glanced around. "Like you?"

Dracena smiled. "Yes."

There was something so completely matter-of-fact about it that Harry almost laughed. Dracena wasn't joking.

"You're Harry Potter." she continued. "People are going to want things from you. You won't always know why they're being friendly. You need someone who understands these things."

That, Harry had to admit, sounded almost sensible. "And you do?"

"I've been around these people my entire life." She hesitated. Then said, quietly: "I could show you."

Harry looked at her. For a moment, all the superiority disappeared. There was just Dracena. The strange girl from the robe shop. She really meant it.

Harry smiled. "That's nice."

Dracena's face lit up.

"But I'm still staying here. I'm learning a lot from Ron and Hermione." The light disappeared.

"Oh."

Harry immediately felt bad. "I mean, you can stay too."

Dracena looked at Ron, then Hermione.

"No." she said, icily

Ron rolled his eyes. Dracena ignored him.

"Potter, that's rather what I'm trying to explain."

"What?"

She lowered her voice slightly, as though she were about to share something important. "There are some wizarding families that are better than others."

Ron went rigid. Harry frowned. "Better how?" Harry asked, acidly.

Dracena seemed surprised by the question. "Better."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Older. More respected. Better connected. Families that have contributed something."

Ron had gone red. "My family's old." Ron said, indignantly.

Dracena glanced at him. "Yes. It is."

The way she said it was somehow worse than if she'd disagreed.

Ron stood. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Sit down, Ron." Hermione said.

"I'm only telling Potter the truth."

"No." Harry said. "You're insulting my friends."

Dracena looked genuinely startled. "Friends?"

"Yeah."

"You've known them for an hour."

"So?"

"So..."

Dracena faltered.

Harry waited.

Dracena looked at Ron, then at Hermione. Then back at Harry. Something about this seemed to trouble her far more than Harry expected.

"Potter, I'm offering to help you."

"I know."

"You don't know what you're doing."

"Probably not."

"I do." Dracena said.

"Congratulations."

Dracena's eyes flashed.

Harry felt that strange little spark again. Annoying her was kind of fun. He had absolutely no idea why.

Dracena drew herself up. "You'd do considerably better at Hogwarts if you learned to recognize a good opportunity when someone offers you one."

"Maybe." Harry smiled. "But I don't think I need you picking my friends." The words landed harder than he'd intended.

Dracena's face changed. The confidence vanished. Harry saw an eleven-year-old girl who had offered something she genuinely expected him to want and had just discovered that he didn't. She looked hurt.

Harry's smile disappeared. "I didn't mean..."

Then the mask slammed back into place.

"Fine." Dracena lifted her chin. "I was only trying to prevent you from making an idiot of yourself."

Ron muttered something.

Dracena rounded on him. "What was that, Weasley?"

"I said he's doing fine without your help."

"Nobody asked you."

"Nobody asked you either."

"Ron." Hermione warned.

Dracena looked back at Harry. "Enjoy your company, Potter."

"I will."

"Wonderful."

"Brilliant."

"I hope you have a delightful journey."

"Having one so far."

Her eyes narrowed.

"You are incredibly irritating."

Harry grinned. "You came looking for me."

One of Dracena's friends made a tiny choking sound. Dracena's cheeks went pink. "I did not."

"You just said you did."

"I happened to be walking past."

"You said, 'I came to find you.'"

"I was being polite."

"You're not very good at it." Harry said, smiling.

Ron burst out laughing. Hermione covered her mouth, gasping.

Dracena looked furious.

Harry was having an excellent time.

"You know, Potter, I was beginning to think you were interesting."

"You've been staring at me since you opened the door."

Dracena's mouth fell open.

Harry realized, a second too late, that he'd noticed because he'd been staring at her too. Dracena realized it at exactly the same moment.

They both went red. Hermione looked between them. Ron looked completely lost.

Dracena recovered. Barely. "Your hair is ridiculous."

Harry touched it instinctively.

"Your hair looks like somebody poured flour over your head." Harry said, grinning.

Dracena gasped.

Ron howled.

"You...!" Dracena pointed at Harry. "You have absolutely no idea who you're dealing with."

"Dracena Malfoy. You told me twice."

"Goodbye, Potter."

"Bye, Malfoy."

She spun around, and stopped at the door.

Harry waited. She glanced back for a moment. Just for a moment.

Harry was still smiling.

Dracena tried very hard not to, and failed miserably.

She then became furious at herself, turning beet red. She disappeared down the corridor with her entourage.

The compartment went quiet.

Ron stared after her. "She's awful."

Harry was still looking at the doorway. "Yeah."

"Really awful." Ron said.

"Yeah." Harry said, distracted.

"Completely full of herself."

"Definitely."

Harry looked down at the Chocolate Frog in his hand, then back toward the door.

Ron frowned at him. "What?"

"Nothing."

Hermione was staring at Harry. Harry noticed.

"What?"

"You like her."

Harry nearly dropped the Chocolate Frog. "What?"

Ron stared at Hermione. "Are you mental?"

Hermione shrugged. "He does."

"I do not!"

Hermione looked toward the corridor. "She likes you too."

Ron looked positively appalled. "She just spent five minutes insulting us!"

"Yes." Hermione said, matter of factly.

"And him!"

"Yes."

"And then he insulted her!"

"Yes."

Ron stared. "How does that mean they like each other?"

Hermione thought about it. "I don't know. It's just obvious." She frowned. "I still think I'm right."

"You're not."

"All right." She said it in a way that made Harry certain she didn't believe him.

Ron shook his head. "Malfoy."

Harry looked at the door again. "She's not that bad."

Ron stared at him. "She called my whole family rubbish!"

"She didn't actually say rubbish."

"Harry!"

"All right! She's horrible."

Hermione smiled. Harry caught it.

"What?"

"Nothing." she said, smiling.

"You've got that look."

"What look?"

"You've known me less than an hour. You don't know my looks."

Harry considered that. "Fair."

The Sorting Hat



"Malfoy, Dracena!"

Dracena rose from the bench, straightened her robes, and walked toward the stool with the practiced composure of someone who had been preparing for this moment since she could walk. There was no question where she belonged. Her father had been a Slytherin. Her mother had been a Slytherin. Generations of Malfoys had been Slytherins.

She sat down. Professor McGonagall lowered the Sorting Hat onto her head.

"Ahhh. A Malfoy. Well, this should be straightforward. A long and distinguished family history of..."

The voice stopped. Dracena waited.

"*Oh.*"

She frowned.

"*Oh, my.*"

"*What?*" *Dracena asked.*

"*Well, now. That's interesting.*"

Dracena shifted impatiently on the stool.

" *Come on. Get it over with and put me in Slytherin already.* "

"*Oh, you're a cheeky one, aren't you?*"

"*I know where I belong.*"

Yes, yes. You certainly do.

"*Then what's taking so long?*"

Well, there's ambition. Quite a lot of it, actually. Cunning. Pride. Resourcefulness. A rather impressive sense of self-importance, if I may say so.

"*You may not.*"

The Hat chuckled.

" *And there's the Malfoy temper. Good heavens, there's a lot of that.* "

"*Are you quite finished?*"

"*Not remotely.*"

Dracena sighed.

"*You know, there's something rather Gryffindor about you.*"

Dracena nearly fell off the stool. "WHAT?"

Several students looked up.

" *Oh, don't look so horrified. I didn't say I was going to put you there.* "

"*Good!*"

"*But it's there. Courage. A rather stubborn sort of courage, too. The kind that doesn't know when to stop.*"

"*I'm a Malfoy!*"

Yes, I had gathered that from the name.

"*And Malfoys belong in Slytherin!*"

"*Generally speaking, yes.*"

"*Then PUT ME THERE!*"

The Hat began to laugh. A deep, rolling laugh that seemed to shake the ancient fabric around her ears.

Dracena sat rigidly on the stool. "*What is so funny?*"

"*Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.*"

"You're laughing at me!"

"*I'm afraid I am.*"

"Well, stop it!"

That only made the Hat laugh harder. "*Oh, my dear girl. You are going to be trouble.*"

Dracena folded her arms.

"*I most certainly am not.*"

"*Oh, you most certainly are.*"

"*I'll have you know that my father...*"

"*Yes, yes. Lucius Malfoy. I remember him. Very serious young man. Very certain of himself. Rather like you, actually.*"

"*Then you should know...*"

"*Oh, I know quite a lot about you, Dracena Malfoy.*" Something in the Hat's voice changed. It was still amused, but there was a curious warmth beneath it. "*You're clever. You're proud. You love your family. You know exactly who you are, and you're quite certain you know who you're going to become.*"

"*Of course I do.*"

"*Yes. That's what makes this so entertaining.*"

Dracena frowned. "*What does that mean?*"

"*Oh, you're going to change, my dear.*"

"*I most certainly am not!*"

"*Oh, yes, you are.*"

"*I'm going to be a Malfoy!*"

"*I rather expect you will.*"

"*Then what are you talking about?*"

The Hat chuckled again. " *Let's just say that you're going to learn some very interesting things about yourself over the next few years.*"

Dracena stared straight ahead.

"*And you're going to cause an extraordinary amount of trouble along the way.*"

"*I am NOT!*"

"*Oh, I do hope it's all for the better.*"

"*Wait. What?*"

Well, there's only one place for you, of course.

"*FINALLY!*"

The Hat drew a breath.

" **SLYTHERIN!** "

Applause erupted from the Slytherin table.

Dracena reached up to remove the Hat. But just before she lifted it from her head, the voice whispered one final time.

"*Have fun, Dracena Malfoy. Oh, this is going to be marvelous.*" And then the Hat began laughing again.

Dracena practically tore it off her head. She marched toward the Slytherin table, her cheeks burning. Behind her, Professor McGonagall picked up the Hat and regarded it with a faintly suspicious expression. For one brief moment, she could have sworn the ancient thing was still chuckling.

The hat fell over Harry's eyes. For a moment, there was only darkness. Then a small voice spoke directly into his head.

"*Hmm.*"

Harry nearly jumped.

"*Oh, don't do that. You'll knock me off.*"

"*Sorry.*"

"*Interesting. Very interesting.*"

Harry waited. The Hat seemed to be rummaging around inside his head. Harry wasn't sure he liked that.

"*Plenty of courage. Oh, yes. More than you know. Loyalty, certainly. Rather a reckless streak. That's going to cause trouble.*"

"*What?*"

"*Nothing you need concern yourself with yet*."

The Hat seemed almost to chuckle inside his skull.

"*Gryffindor would suit you very well*."

Harry relaxed.

Then the Hat said: "*But...*"

Harry immediately became nervous again. "*But what?*"

"*Oh, nothing*."

"*You can't say "but" and then say nothing*."

The Hat laughed.

"*Oh, you're going to be entertaining*."

Harry frowned beneath the brim.

"*What does that mean?*"

"*It means you are very certain about some things for a boy who learned they existed literally five minutes ago*."

Harry thought indignantly that this wasn't fair. *Life rarely is*.

"*Stop doing that*."

"*Doing what?*"

"*Listening to what I'm thinking*."

The Hat was silent for a moment.

"*You do understand what I am, don't you?*"

Harry hadn't really considered that. "*Never mind*."

" *You might consider Slytherin*."

Harry's stomach dropped. "*WHAT?*"

Several students nearby glanced toward the stool. Harry remembered the pale boy he'd met earlier. The stories Ron had told him.

Dark wizards.
Bad people.
And that blonde girl from Madam Malkin's...

Dracena. She had said she expected to be in Slytherin.

Harry had liked her, at first. Then she'd started talking about Muggles. And Hagrid.

"*No*."

The Hat sounded amused. "*No?*"

"*Not Slytherin*."

"*Interesting*."

"*What's interesting?*"

"*You*."

"*Why?*"

The Hat didn't answer immediately. Harry heard something that sounded suspiciously like laughter. "*Oh, my boy.*"

"*What?*"

"*Nothing*."

"*You keep saying that!*"

"*Because explaining it would spoil all the fun*."

Harry frowned.

"*I don't want Slytherin*."

"*Yes, yes. You've made that abundantly clear.*"

The Hat shifted slightly on his head.

"*Still...*"

Harry groaned inwardly. "*What now?*"

"*There are things Slytherin could teach you*."

"*I don't want to be a Slytherin!*"

"*I didn't say you were one*."

Harry stopped. The Hat's voice became quieter. "*That's something children frequently misunderstand about this ceremony*."

"*What?*"

"*You think being placed somewhere means everything outside it must belong to somebody else*."

"*I don't understand*"

"*You will*."

Something about the Hat's voice made him uncomfortable.

" *There are things you'll need that won't come naturally to you, Harry Potter.*"

Harry's heart jumped. The Hat knew his name. Of course it knew his name. It was rummaging around through his mind.

"*Patience*." *the Hat continued*. "*Restraint. Cunning. Knowing when not to charge directly at the thing frightening you*."

Harry thought that sounded rather cowardly. The Hat laughed again.

"*Oh, yes. You are definitely going to be trouble*."

Harry scowled. "*Can you just put me in Gryffindor?*"

"*I could*."

"*Please?*"

The hat stayed silent for a moment "*Although...*"

Harry groaned. "*WHAT?*"

"*Nothing, nothing*."

But Harry could practically feel the Hat smiling.

"*Just remember this conversation someday*."

"*Why?*"

"*Because one day, Harry Potter, I suspect you are going to discover that Slytherin contains something you very desperately want*."

Harry immediately thought of Dracena Malfoy. He had no idea why. His face became hot. The Hat burst out laughing. " *Oh, this is going to be marvelous*."

"*Shut up!*"

"*As you wish*."

And then, suddenly, the voice wasn't inside Harry's head anymore.

The Hat shouted for the entire Great Hall to hear: **"GRYFFINDOR!"**

The table to Harry's left exploded in cheers. Harry pulled off the Hat and hurried toward them. Halfway there, for reasons he couldn't explain, he looked toward the Slytherin table.

Dracena Malfoy was watching him. She had already been Sorted.

Their eyes met. Dracena made a face at him. Harry made one back.

She smiled. Harry smiled too. Then he remembered they weren't supposed to like each other.

He quickly turned away and sat beside Ron. From the stool behind him came the faintest rustle of ancient fabric. Harry could have sworn it sounded like laughter.

Year 2

The Flying Lesson



Harry Potter had never been particularly good at sports.

This was mostly because Dudley had made certain Harry was never particularly good at anything. At his old school, Harry had spent most of his time avoiding games that involved being chased by large boys. He was quite good at running, although he had never considered this an athletic accomplishment so much as a survival skill.

Consequently, when Madam Hooch announced that their first flying lesson would involve riding broomsticks, Harry wasn't entirely certain what to expect. He knew wizards flew on broomsticks. He'd seen pictures. He'd

also seen pictures of dragons, and he sincerely hoped nobody expected him to ride one of those.

The class assembled on the lawn outside Hogwarts. A row of rather battered broomsticks lay on the grass. Harry examined the one nearest him. It looked like something Aunt Petunia might have used to sweep the garden shed.

"Those are dreadful."

Harry didn't need to turn around. "Morning, Malfoy."

Dracena Malfoy stood beside him, examining the school brooms with obvious distaste. Her platinum-blonde hair was tied back with a green ribbon. Her robes were immaculate, her shoes polished, and her expression suggested that the entire lesson had been arranged specifically to offend her.

"Honestly, Potter. Look at them."

Harry looked. "Yeah?"

"They're ancient."

"So?"

"So they're practically antiques."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe they're valuable."

Dracena stared at him. "That's not how broomsticks work."

"How would I know?"

She sighed. "Obviously."

Harry smiled.

Dracena narrowed her eyes. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Look so pleased with yourself."

"I'm not."

"You are."

Harry grinned. "Can't help it. You're very entertaining."

Dracena's cheeks turned slightly pink. She looked away. "Idiot."

Ron appeared beside Harry. "Don't mind her. My dad says the Malfoys probably think anything that costs less than a hundred Galleons is firewood."

Dracena turned. "Weasley."

"Malfoy."

"How delightful. They've let you out of the charity ward."

Ron went red.

Harry sighed. "Dracena."

She looked at him. "What?"

"Must you?"

"Must I what?"

"Be horrible?"

Dracena looked genuinely surprised. "I'm not being horrible."

Ron made an incredulous noise.

"I'm being accurate."

Harry shook his head. "There's a difference."

Dracena considered that, then she smiled sweetly. "Not always, Potter."

Before Harry could answer, Madam Hooch blew her whistle. "Everyone beside a broomstick! Quickly!"

The students hurried into position. Dracena selected a broom near the end of the row. She examined it, made a face, then nudged it with her shoe. "Disgusting."

Harry looked at his own. It had several bent twigs and a handle that appeared to have been repaired with something resembling glue. He decided not to complain.

"Now." Madam Hooch announced, "hold your right hand over your broom and say 'Up!'"

"UP!" shouted the class.

Nothing much happened.

Ron's broom rolled over.

Neville's twitched.

Hermione's rose several inches, then fell back into the grass.

Harry looked down at the broom. "Up." The broom leapt into his hand.

He blinked. "Oh."

Beside him, Ron stared. "Blimey."

Harry looked at the broom, then at Ron. "What?"

"You did it."

Harry shrugged. "Was I not supposed to?"

Across the lawn, Dracena was watching. Her own broom had risen obediently into her hand, although not quite as quickly.

She looked at Harry's, then at her own broom. Her expression darkened. Harry noticed.

"What?" Harry said, acidly.

"Nothing."

"You're staring."

"At the broom."

"Which I'm holding." Harry grinned at her.

"Unfortunately."

Harry smiled. Dracena turned away. *Show-off*.

The irritating thing was that Potter hadn't even looked as though he were trying. He'd simply said *Up* , and the broom had practically jumped into his arms.

Dracena had been flying since she was little. Father had bought her a beautiful little training broom when she was six. She'd spent summers racing around the gardens at the Manor, occasionally terrifying the house-elves.

Potter, apparently, had never flown before. And he'd just done that. It was absurd.

Madam Hooch demonstrated how to mount the brooms and grip them properly. "Now, when I blow my whistle, kick off gently. Rise a few feet, hover, and come straight back down." She looked sternly around the class. "Nobody is to go flying off across the grounds. Is that understood?"

Everyone nodded. Neville looked terrified.

Harry glanced at him. "You all right?"

Neville swallowed. "Not really."

"Just do what she says." Neville nodded.

Dracena watched the exchange. Potter was always doing that, talking to people who were frightened as though it were perfectly natural. She didn't understand it.

Madam Hooch raised her whistle. "On my signal..."

Neville kicked off too early, much too hard. His broom shot upward.

"Neville!" Madam Hooch shouted.

Neville screamed.

The broom climbed.
Ten feet.
Fifteen.
Twenty.

Harry stared. "Blimey."

Neville was clinging desperately to the handle. "HELP!"

The broom bucked. Neville slipped. For one horrible second he hung from the handle by both hands. Then he fell.

Harry winced.

Neville struck the ground with a sickening thump.

Madam Hooch ran toward him. "Nobody move!"

Neville was crying. His wrist hung at an unpleasant angle. Madam Hooch examined it.

"Broken. Come along, dear. Hospital wing." She helped him to his feet, then turned toward the class. "Everyone is to remain on the ground until I return. Anyone who takes off will be out of Hogwarts before they can say Quidditch."

Harry wondered exactly what "Quidditch" was.

She led Neville away. The class stood in uncomfortable silence. Dracena noticed something glittering in the grass. "Oh." She bent down. A small glass ball lay near Neville's abandoned broom. Inside it, red smoke swirled. Dracena picked it up. "Well, look at this."

Ron turned. "That's Neville's Remembrall."

Dracena examined it. "Is it?"

"His gran sent it."

"How charming."

She held it up to the sunlight. "Rather cheap-looking, isn't it?"

Harry sighed. "Dracena."

She looked at him. "What?"

"Give it back."

"To whom?"

"Neville."

"Neville isn't here."

"Then give it to me."

Dracena smiled. "Oh, Potter."

Harry knew that smile. He'd learned to distrust it.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Whatever you're thinking."

Dracena looked offended. "I'm not thinking anything."

"That's a first."

Ron laughed.

Dracena's eyes narrowed, then she looked at the broom in her hand. An idea occurred to her. A rather delightful idea. She smiled. Harry groaned.

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

"Dracena."

"Catch me, Potter."

She kicked off. The broom shot into the air.

Harry stared. "You're joking."

Dracena climbed rapidly, laughing. "Come and get it!"

Ron looked at Harry. "She's mental."

Harry looked at his broom, then up at Dracena as she rose into the air.

He sighed. "Apparently so am I."

He mounted, kicked off, and chased after her.

Harry had never felt anything like it.

The broom rose beneath him as though it understood exactly what he wanted.

He leaned forward? It accelerated.

He shifted his weight? It turned.

He climbed, and the ground dropped away.

For one glorious moment, Harry forgot everything.

The Dursleys.
School.
Lessons.
The fact that he was breaking Madam Hooch's instructions thirty seconds after she'd given them.

He laughed. Loudly. Flying was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.

Above him, Dracena heard him. She glanced down, as Potter was coming toward her.

Fast. Very fast.

Her eyes widened. *Oh*. She leaned forward, and her broom accelerated.

Harry followed.

Dracena glanced back.

He was gaining.

That's impossible.

She'd been flying for years.

Potter had been flying for fifteen seconds.

"Give it back!" Harry shouted.

Dracena laughed. "Come and take it!"

Harry climbed.

Dracena banked sharply left.

Harry followed.

She dove.

He dove.

She rose.

He rose.

Dracena's heart began hammering with excitement.

Potter was keeping up. He was actually keeping up. She'd never had anyone her age do that before. Her cousins were either too young or too old, and the children Father invited to the Manor generally let her win.

Potter wasn't letting her win. He was trying to beat her. She liked it. She liked it enormously.

"You're going to get us both expelled!" Harry shouted.

Dracena looked back. "Then stop chasing me!"

"Give Neville's Remembrall back!"

"Come and get it!"

"I am!"

"Not very successfully!"

Harry grinned. He leaned forward, and the broom surged.

Dracena gasped. Suddenly he was beside her.

"Hello."

She nearly fell off. "Potter!"

"Malfoy."

"How did you..."

"Nice weather."

"You're impossible!"

"Been told."

Dracena swerved, and Harry followed.

She climbed. He climbed after her

She dove. He dove after her. For several moments neither spoke, they simply flew. Harry forgot he was supposed to be annoyed. They were laughing. Actually laughing. Racing one another across the Hogwarts grounds. For a little while, it was just fun, then Dracena remembered the Remembrall. She remembered that she was supposed to win.

She pulled sharply upward, and Harry followed. They hovered high above the lawn. Dracena held up the little glass ball. "Well, Potter?"

Harry smiled. "Well, Malfoy?"

"Still want it?"

"Obviously."

"Then come and get it."

Harry leaned forward.

Dracena pulled back.

"Ah-ah."

Harry stopped.

She smiled. "You know, Potter, for someone who's supposed to be famous, you're remarkably easy to manipulate."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"All I had to do was pick up a silly little ball, and you came flying after me."

"Because it's Neville's."

"Yes, yes. Your poor little friend."

Harry's smile faded.

Dracena noticed, but she'd found her opening. Dracena Malfoy did not abandon an advantage once she'd found it.

"Honestly, Potter. Do you always come running whenever someone needs rescuing?"

"Only when someone is being horrible."

"Then you must be terribly busy."

"Mostly when you're around."

Dracena laughed. "See? There you go again."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"Following me."

Harry stared.

Dracena smiled triumphantly. "Every time I do something, there you are."

Harry opened his mouth. Closed it.

Dracena's smile widened. "Really, Potter. People will start talking."

Harry went red. "About what?"

"Oh, I don't know." She tilted her head. "Perhaps they'll think you like chasing me."

Harry stared. Dracena was enormously pleased with herself.

Harry smiled. "Well, you keep running away." Dracena blinked. For one terrible moment she couldn't think of anything to say. Her cheeks warmed.

"Only because you're so slow."

Harry laughed.

Dracena lifted the Remembrall. "Now, I think we've established who's the better flyer."

Harry looked incredulous. "We have?"

"Obviously."

"You haven't lost me yet."

"No."

She smiled sweetly. "But I've got what you want." Harry glanced at the glass ball.

Dracena saw it. Suddenly she knew exactly how to end the argument. She held the Remembrall over the empty air.

Harry's expression changed. "Dracena."

She smiled. "Goodbye, Potter."

She threw it.

Harry didn't think. He simply moved.

The Remembrall fell. Harry pushed his broom downward, hard.

The wind roared past his ears. The ground rushed toward him. Someone screamed. Harry barely heard it.

He could see the little glass ball.
Falling.
Falling.

He leaned farther forward. The broom accelerated. The lawn filled his vision.

Ten feet.
Five.
Three.

Harry reached. His fingers closed around the Remembrall.

He pulled up. The broom responded instantly. Harry skimmed across the grass, so low his shoes brushed the tops of the blades.

Then he rose, stopped, and landed.

Silence.

Harry stared at the little glass ball in his hand. He was breathing hard.

Ron shouted. "HARRY!"

The Gryffindors erupted. Harry grinned. He'd done it. He'd actually done it.

Above him, Dracena hovered motionless. Her mouth was open. She'd never seen anyone fly like that.

Not her cousins.
Not the older students.
Not even some of the professional Quidditch players Father had taken her to watch.

Potter had dived almost vertically, caught the ball, and pulled out of the dive inches from the ground.

On a school broom. On his first flight.

Dracena swallowed.

Oh.

She looked down at him. Harry was laughing. Ron was slapping him on the back. Hermione looked horrified and relieved simultaneously.

Dracena felt something unpleasant twist inside her.

Jealousy? Certainly. Potter had just done something extraordinary. Something she wasn't sure she could have done herself.

But there was something else too, a strange, warm feeling.

She'd watched him.
She'd seen what he'd done.
And some part of her was... Proud?

No. That was ridiculous. Why would she be proud of Potter?

He'd just made her look like an amateur.

Dracena scowled.

Then she heard a voice.

"POTTER!"

Professor McGonagall stood at the edge of the lawn.

Harry froze. Dracena smiled.

Oh, excellent.

"Professor!"

McGonagall looked furious. "Miss Malfoy."

Dracena adopted her most innocent expression. "Professor, I'm so glad you're here."

Harry closed his eyes.

Here we go.

"Potter has been flying without permission."

McGonagall stared at her.

Dracena continued. "Madam Hooch expressly forbade us from leaving the ground, and Potter completely disregarded her instructions."

Harry looked at her.

"Dracena!"

She ignored him. "He was flying recklessly, Professor. Very dangerously . I was quite concerned."

Ron made a strangled noise.

McGonagall said nothing.

Dracena pressed her advantage. "I think he ought to be disciplined."

Harry stared. "You started it!"

Dracena looked offended. "I beg your pardon?"

"You stole Neville's Remembrall!"

"I found it."

"And flew away with it!"

"I was merely..."

"Miss Malfoy." McGonagall's voice cut through the argument.

Dracena stopped. "Yes, Professor?"

McGonagall looked at her for a very long moment. "I saw everything."

Dracena's smile vanished. "Oh."

" **Everything** ."

Dracena swallowed.

McGonagall turned toward Harry. "Potter. Come with me." Harry's stomach dropped.

"But Professor..."

"Now."

Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked miserable. Hermione shook her head.

Dracena stood very still.

Harry turned toward her. "Thanks a lot, Malfoy."

She opened her mouth. For some reason, she wanted to say she was sorry. "You should have followed the rules, Potter." was what came out, instead.

Harry glared, then followed McGonagall toward the castle.

Dracena watched him go. Her victory felt considerably less satisfying than she'd expected.

Harry was certain he was about to be expelled.

McGonagall marched him through the corridors without speaking.

Harry tried explaining twice. She ignored him.

Finally they reached a classroom. McGonagall opened the door.

"Wood!"

A tall, broad-shouldered boy looked up. "Professor?"

"Oliver, I need a word."

Oliver Wood followed them into the corridor. McGonagall looked at Harry. "Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

Harry blinked. "Quidditch?"

Wood looked at him, then at McGonagall. "Professor?"

"I believe I've found you a Seeker."

Wood stared.

Harry stared.

McGonagall continued. "Mr. Potter has just performed a dive that I would hesitate to attempt myself, and recovered a falling object inches from the ground."

Wood's eyes widened. "On a broom?"

Harry looked confused. "Well, yes."

"What kind?"

Harry shrugged. "One of the school ones."

Wood stared. "You're joking."

"I assure you, Oliver, I am not."

Wood looked back at Harry. "How long have you been flying?"

Harry hesitated. "About five minutes?"

Wood made a peculiar noise.

McGonagall almost smiled. "Precisely."

Wood grabbed Harry by the shoulders. "Five minutes?"

Harry nodded.

Wood looked delighted. "Professor, this is brilliant!"

McGonagall raised a finger. "Provided Mr. Potter understands that flying without permission is not acceptable."

Harry nodded rapidly. "Yes, Professor."

"And that attempting such maneuvers without supervision is extraordinarily dangerous."

"Yes, Professor."

"And that he will not be repeating today's performance merely to impress his classmates."

Harry went red. "I wasn't trying to impress anyone!"

McGonagall raised an eyebrow.

Harry thought of Dracena, then looked at the floor.

Wood was grinning. "Well, Harry, welcome to Quidditch."

Harry blinked. "Really?"

"Really."

Wood looked toward McGonagall.

"That's two second-years, then."

Harry frowned. "Two?"

Wood nodded.

"Slytherin's got a new Seeker too."

Harry felt a horrible suspicion forming.

Wood continued.

"Apparently she's extraordinary. Been flying since she was little. Their captain's been bragging about her for weeks."

Harry closed his eyes. "No."

Wood looked puzzled. "What?"

Harry sighed. "Dracena Malfoy?"

Wood snapped his fingers. "That's her!"

Harry groaned, and Wood laughed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Know her?"

Harry considered. "Unfortunately."

McGonagall looked amused.

Wood grinned.

"Well, this should be interesting. Two of the youngest Seekers Hogwarts has seen in ages."

Harry thought about Dracena.

Her smug smile.
Her ridiculous hair.
Her infuriating habit of treating everyone as though they were beneath her.
Then he thought about the way she'd flown.

Fast.
Confident.
Clever.

He smiled. "Yeah."

Wood noticed.

Harry looked up. "Yeah, I think it will."

Dracena found him two days later, practicing on the lawn with one of the school's battered brooms. Wood had given him some exercises.

Climb.
Turn.
Dive.
Recover.

Harry was discovering that flying was considerably easier than almost anything else he'd ever tried. He was also discovering that he liked it more than almost anything else he'd ever tried.

"Potter!" Harry looked down. Dracena stood beside the pitch. He descended.

"Malfoy."

She examined the broom. Her expression became one of profound disgust.

"You're still using that?"

Harry looked at it. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because it flies."

Dracena stared. "Potter."

"What?"

"That's a school broom."

"Very observant."

"It's practically firewood."

Harry shrugged. "Seems all right to me."

Dracena looked at him, then at the broom.

Harry waited.

"I hear Wood made you Seeker."

Harry grinned. "Yeah."

Dracena lifted her chin. "Congratulations."

Harry blinked. That was unexpected. "Thanks."

She looked away. "I suppose you weren't entirely dreadful."

Harry smiled. "Careful, Malfoy. That almost sounded like a compliment."

Dracena flushed. "Don't be ridiculous."

Harry laughed. She glared in response

"Honestly, Potter, you can't possibly intend to compete on that thing."

Harry shrugged. "Why not?"

"Because you'll lose."

Harry smiled. "To you?"

"Obviously."

"Looking forward to it."

Dracena hesitated. Something about the way he said it made her stomach flutter. She suppressed the feeling immediately.

"Well." She straightened. "Perhaps there's another possibility."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Dracena smiled. The one she used when she believed she was about to offer someone something irresistible. "You could play for Slytherin."

Harry stared. "What?"

"Slytherin."

"I heard you."

"Well?"

Harry laughed. "You're joking."

Dracena looked offended. "Certainly not."

"I'm in Gryffindor."

"Yes, Potter, I'm aware."

"Then how would I play for Slytherin?"

Dracena waved a hand. "It's not entirely unheard of for students to play for other Houses."

Harry looked doubtful. "Really?"

"Well. It's unusual."

"How unusual?"

"That isn't the point."

Harry grinned. "Right."

Dracena sighed. "Potter, I'm trying to offer you something."

Harry remembered the train, and smiled. "Again?"

Dracena's cheeks warmed. "Don't start."

Harry folded his arms. "All right. What?"

Dracena brightened. "A proper broom."

Harry looked down at the battered school broom. "What's wrong with this one?"

Dracena stared. "Everything."

"It flies."

"Barely."

"I seem to have done all right with it."

Dracena's expression tightened. She remembered the dive. The speed. The impossible recovery.

"Imagine what you could do with something better."

Harry considered. "Like what?"

Dracena smiled. "A Nimbus 2000."

Harry blinked. "A what?"

Dracena stared. "A Nimbus 2000."

"Is that good?"

She looked as though he'd asked whether water was wet. "Potter."

"What?"

"It's one of the finest racing brooms available."

"Oh."

Harry looked at his own broom.

"Right."

She frowned. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Wouldn't you like one?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose."

Dracena smiled triumphantly. "Exactly."

Harry looked suspicious. "What's the catch?"

"No catch."

"Really?"

"Well, you'd have to join Slytherin's team."

Harry laughed.

Dracena scowled. "Stop laughing. I'm serious."

Harry looked at her. He realized she was.

"Dracena, why would you want me on your team?"

She opened her mouth, then stopped. That was an excellent question. She knew perfectly well why. Potter was talented. Extraordinarily talented. Having him on Slytherin would practically guarantee victory.

It would also mean she'd get to practice with him.
Fly with him.
Talk to him.
Spend time with him.

Dracena's face warmed. *Absolutely not*. She lifted her chin. "Because you'd be useful."

Harry's smile faded. "Useful?"

"Yes."

He looked at her.

Dracena continued. "Father could arrange it. He knows people. He could make certain you had the best equipment."

Harry considered, then shook his head. "No, thanks."

Dracena blinked. "What?"

"No."

"But..."

"I'm happy in Gryffindor."

"Potter, you're being ridiculous."

"Probably."

"You'd have a much better broom."

"Maybe."

"And better opportunities."

Harry sighed. "Dracena, you know, you'd be a lot more fun if you weren't such a snob."

Dracena stared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're a snob."

"I am *not* a snob!"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You just offered to buy me an expensive broom because you think Gryffindor isn't good enough for me."

"That is not what I said!"

"You said I should associate with better people."

"Well, you should!"

Harry spread his hands. "See?"

Dracena scowled. "Potter, there is nothing wrong with having standards."

"No. But there's something wrong with thinking everyone who isn't like you is beneath them."

Dracena opened her mouth, then lifted her chin. "Well, I suppose you wouldn't understand. You weren't raised among people of any particular standing."

Harry winced. "See, there you go again."

"What?"

"Being a snob."

Dracena went red. "I am merely pointing out that we come from very different backgrounds."

"Yeah. I noticed."

"And there's nothing wrong with being proud of one's family."

"Didn't say there was."

"Or one's heritage."

"Didn't say that either."

"Then what exactly *are* you saying, Potter?"

Harry looked at her. He thought about the robe shop.
The train.
The way she'd laughed while he chased her across the grounds.

For a moment he forgot to be annoyed. "I'm saying you're actually rather fun when you stop being such a petulant snob.

Dracena blinked. "What?"

Harry shrugged. "Flying with you was brilliant."

Her cheeks warmed. "It was?"

"Yeah." Harry smiled. "Until you tried to smash Neville's Remembrall, anyway."

Dracena looked away. "Oh."

"I just wish you didn't have to be horrible to everyone else."

Dracena's expression tightened. "I'm not horrible."

"You're pretty horrible to Ron."

"Well, Weasley..."

"And Hermione."

"Granger is..."

"Dracena."

She stopped.

Harry smiled. "See? You were doing it again."

Dracena glared. "You are the most infuriating boy I've ever met."

"Thanks."

"That wasn't a compliment!"

"I know."

She folded her arms. "Well, for your information, Potter, I find you quite irritating myself."

Harry smiled faintly. "Dracena. Thanks, but no."

She stopped.

He looked at her. "I don't really need people to buy my friendship."

Dracena froze.

"Why do you?"

"What?" Dracena said, angrily

Harry hesitated.

"I just mean..."

"Are you suggesting I buy my friends?"

Harry shifted. "Well, you keep offering me things."

Dracena's cheeks went red. "I'm trying to help you!"

"I know."

"Clearly you don't!"

Harry frowned. "Dracena..."

"My friends are my friends because they want to be!"

Harry looked at her. "All right."

"They respect me!"

"All right."

"They..."

She stopped.

Because suddenly she wasn't entirely sure what she was going to say.

Pansy liked her. Of course Pansy liked her. They'd known each other for years. Their families knew one another. They attended the same parties. They went on holidays together. Pansy liked spending time at the Manor.

Everyone liked spending time at the Manor. It was a wonderful house. And Father knew everyone.

And...

Dracena felt something unpleasant move inside her.

Harry watched her. He hadn't intended to upset her quite this much.

"Look." he said, "I just don't want to leave my team."

Dracena looked up. "Then don't." Her voice was icy.

Harry sighed. "Dracena..."

"Enjoy your dreadful broom, Potter."

Harry looked down at it. "Thanks. I will."

"You really don't know anything about the wizarding world."

Harry smiled. "Learning every day."

She glared. "You're insufferable."

"Been told."

"You'll regret turning down that broom."

"Maybe."

"You'll lose."

"To you?"

Dracena lifted her chin. "Of course."

Harry grinned. "Then I'll see you on the pitch."

Harry shrugged.

He mounted his broom, kicked off, and resumed Wood's exercises.

Dracena returned to the Slytherin common room in a foul mood.

Pansy found her sitting beside the fire. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Pansy sat beside her. "Potter?"

Dracena glared. "Why would you think that?"

Pansy smiled. "Because you're making that face."

"What face?"

"The Potter face."

Dracena stared.

"I do not have a 'Potter face.'"

"Of course not."

Dracena folded her arms.

Pansy waited.

"He refused."

"Refused what?"

"My offer."

"What offer?"

Dracena sighed. "I offered to arrange for him to join our Quidditch team."

Pansy blinked. "Why?"

"Because he's talented."

Pansy stared.

Dracena frowned. "What?"

"You want Potter on our team?"

"He's an excellent flyer."

"He's a Gryffindor."

"I'm aware."

"He's Harry Potter."

"Yes, Pansy, I know his name."

"He's irritating!"

"Of course."

"Arrogant!"

"Naturally."

"And completely impossible!"

Pansy nodded.

Dracena glared. "Stop agreeing with me like that."

Pansy smiled.

Dracena turned toward the fire.

After a while, she said quietly: "He thinks I buy my friends."

Pansy's smile disappeared. "What?"

Dracena looked down. "He said he doesn't need people to buy his friendship."

Pansy frowned. "That's horrible."

Dracena nodded. "Yes."

"Potter's horrible."

"Yes."

"An absolute prat."

Dracena hesitated. "Well, not always."

Pansy stared.

Dracena realized what she'd said. She immediately scowled. "I mean, he's still a prat."

"Of course."

Dracena stared into the fire and leaned back in her chair. "He's going to lose." she announced.

Pansy looked up. "Who?"

"Potter."

"Right."

Dracena smiled. A small, private smile. "He has absolutely no idea what he's getting himself into."

The Dueling Club



"You're going to lose, Potter."

Harry Potter smiled. "Morning, Malfoy."

Dracena Malfoy stood opposite him on the raised platform in the Great Hall, her wand held delicately between two fingers. She looked extraordinarily pleased with herself.

Harry had learned to distrust that expression.

"Are you quite finished embarrassing yourself?" she asked.

Harry glanced around. "Don't think I've started yet."

"Oh, you started the moment you agreed to duel me."

"Really?"

"Naturally."

Harry grinned. "Funny. I thought you were the one who asked."

Dracena lifted her chin. "I thought you might benefit from some instruction."

"Very generous."

"I do try."

"Must be exhausting."

Dracena smiled sweetly. "Not nearly as exhausting as explaining things to you, Potter."

Several students laughed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Very funny."

"Thank you."

"Wasn't a compliment."

"I know. I'm accustomed to receiving those from people who actually know what they're talking about."

Harry laughed. "All right, Malfoy." He raised his wand. "Let's see what you've got."

Dracena's smile widened. "Oh, Potter." She tilted her head. "I thought you'd never ask."

Professor Lockhart, who had been watching the exchange with obvious delight, clapped his hands. "Wonderful! Wonderful! A little competitive spirit!"

Professor Snape stood beside him, looking considerably less delighted. "Perhaps." Snape said dryly, "we might proceed before the students graduate."

Lockhart laughed. "Quite right, Severus!"

He turned toward Harry and Dracena.

"Now, remember, this is a demonstration. We are practicing defensive spells, not attempting to injure one another."

Dracena smiled. "Of course, Professor."

Harry looked at her. "Why don't I believe you?"

"Because you're not terribly bright."

Harry grinned. Dracena grinned back. Evilly.

Snape raised his wand. "On my signal."

Harry and Dracena bowed. Dracena's bow was elegant. Harry's was slightly awkward.

She smiled again "Honestly, Potter. Even your bowing needs work."

Harry straightened. "Shut up, Malfoy."

She laughed. Snape sighed. "Three."

Harry tightened his grip.

"Two."

Dracena raised her wand.

"One."

They moved.

" **Expelliarmus** !" Harry shouted.

" **Protego** !" Dracena's shield flashed. Harry's spell rebounded harmlessly.

She smiled. "Predictable."

" **Stupefy** !"

Dracena ducked. "Too slow, Potter!"

"Then stop moving!"

"That rather defeats the purpose!"

She flicked her wand. " **Rictusempra** !"

Harry twisted aside. The spell struck the wall behind him.

He grinned. "Missed!"

Dracena's eyes narrowed.

"Did I?" She raised her wand again. " **Serpensortia** !"

A jet of light burst from its tip. Something enormous and dark struck the platform. A snake. A large, black snake. It raised its head and hissed. The students nearest the platform shrieked and stumbled backward.

Harry stared. "Blimey."

Dracena smiled triumphantly. "Well, Potter?"

Harry looked at the snake. "Bit dramatic, isn't it?"

"Naturally." She lifted her chin. "Some of us appreciate spectacle."

Harry laughed, and Dracena made a terrible mistake. She looked at him.

Harry was standing with his wand raised, his dark hair falling across his forehead, his green eyes narrowed in concentration. He was smiling.
Dracena felt something peculiar happen in her stomach.

Oh. She blinked.

Harry looked rather...

Well.

Not handsome, exactly. That would be ridiculous. But there was something about the way he stood. The way he held his wand. The way he looked at her as though she were someone worth fighting.

Someone worth challenging.

Someone worth...

Stop that. Dracena shook her head, and lost control of the snake.

It turned, slithering toward the edge of the platform. A frightened Hufflepuff girl stumbled backward. The snake raised its head and hissed.

Harry saw it. "Hey!"

He turned away from Dracena. "Leave her alone!"

The snake hissed again, examining the Hufflepuff girl with snake-like interest.

Harry frowned. "I said leave her alone!" he yelled at the snake.

The snake froze and turned toward him. "Really?" The snake said, insulted. "I wasn't going to hurt her. Honestly."

The snake lowered its head, then coiled quietly on the platform.

Harry stared for a moment. "Did that snake..."

Nobody answered him.

Dracena stared at him. Her mouth was slightly open.

Harry frowned. "What?"

Then Lockhart exclaimed: "Extraordinary!"

Harry turned. Lockhart looked delighted. "Parseltongue!"

Harry blinked.

"What's 'Parcel Tongue?' Talking to packages?" The previously frightened Hufflepuff girl laughed a bit.

Snape's expression had become unreadable. Dracena was still staring. Harry looked at her.

"Dracena?" She blinked. He smiled. "Your snake's behaving now."

Dracena opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Harry raised his wand. " **Expelliarmus** !"

Dracena's wand flew from her hand, and clattered across the platform. She stared.

Harry grinned. "Got you."

Dracena blinked, then her face went scarlet. "That's not fair!"

Harry laughed. "What?"

"I was distracted!"

Harry smiled. "Then don't get distracted next time."

Dracena glared. "Potter!"

"Malfoy."

"You were talking to a snake!"

"Apparently. I think it talked back."

"That's not normal!"

Harry considered. "But conjuring one is?"

Several students laughed. Dracena's cheeks burned.

Harry smiled. "Good duel, though."

She stared, then looked away. "Shut up, Potter."

Harry laughed.

Year 3

The Argument



Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting beneath a tree near the lake. It was an unexpected day off. The weather was beautiful.

Ron was eating something. Hermione was reading. Harry was lying on his back, watching clouds drift across the sky.

For once, everything was peaceful.

"Potter."

Harry closed his eyes. "Of course."

Dracena Malfoy stood nearby with Pansy Parkinson.

Harry sat up. "Malfoy."

Dracena smiled. "Enjoying your afternoon?"

"Was."

She looked at Hermione. "Still studying, Granger?"

Hermione glanced up. "Yes."

Dracena smiled sweetly. "How industrious."

Hermione returned to her book.

Dracena continued. "I suppose when one hasn't the benefit of generations of magical education, one must work terribly hard to compensate."

Hermione stopped reading.

Harry sat up straighter.

Ron scowled. "Oh, shut up, Malfoy."

Dracena looked at him. "Weasley."

Harry sighed. "Dracena."

She turned. "What?"

"Must you?"

Dracena frowned. "Must I what?"

"Be horrible?"

She looked offended. "I'm not being horrible."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I'm merely observing that Granger has certain disadvantages."

Hermione slammed her book shut. "Such as?"

Dracena looked at her. "Your upbringing."

Hermione stared. "My upbringing?"

"Yes."

Hermione smiled thinly. "My parents are dentists."

Dracena blinked. "How charming."

"They're rather good at it."

"I'm sure."

Harry stood. "Dracena."

She looked at him.

He wasn't smiling. "What's wrong with Hermione's parents?"

Dracena frowned. "They're muggles.."

"Why does it matter?"

She sighed. "Potter, you wouldn't understand."

Harry folded his arms. "Try me."

Dracena lifted her chin. "Magical families have traditions."

Harry nodded. "Right."

"Histories."

"Right."

"Responsibilities."

Harry waited. Dracena continued.

"My family has preserved magical knowledge for centuries."

Harry considered. "That's nice."

Dracena frowned. "Nice?"

"Yeah."

She stared. "Potter, it's rather more than nice."

Harry shrugged. "All right."

Dracena looked exasperated.

"Some of the oldest magical families have spent generations preserving spells, artifacts, histories, and knowledge that would otherwise have been lost."

Harry nodded. "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Yeah."

Dracena stared.

Harry continued. "But what does any of that have to do with Hermione?"

Dracena opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Harry waited.

She frowned. "Because she doesn't have that."

Harry looked at Hermione, then back at Dracena.

"So?"

Dracena stared.

"She's still brilliant."

"Yes, but..."

"She's top of nearly every class."

"I know."

"She's better at Charms than I am."

Dracena looked annoyed. "Potter..."

"Better at Transfiguration."

"Yes..."

"Better at Potions."

Ron snorted.

Harry smiled faintly. " **Much** better at Potions."

Hermione tried not to laugh.

Harry turned back. "So what difference does it make?"

Dracena looked increasingly frustrated. "Because heritage matters!"

Harry shrugged. "Why?"

Dracena stared. "Why!?"

"Yeah."

She looked at him as though he'd asked why the sky was blue. "Because it does!"

Harry sighed. "That's not an answer."

Dracena went red. "Potter, you have absolutely no appreciation for tradition."

Harry folded his arms. "Maybe I don't."

Dracena blinked.

He continued. "Maybe I don't understand why a bunch of old families spend so much time congratulating themselves for having old ancestors."

Dracena's expression changed. Harry didn't notice. "Honestly, half the traditions I've heard about seem like excuses to treat people badly."

Dracena's face tightened. "That's not fair."

Harry shrugged. "Isn't it?"

"No.". She stepped closer. "Potter, you have no idea what you're talking about."

Harry looked at her. "Then explain it."

Dracena took a breath. "My family has spent centuries preserving magical knowledge."

Harry nodded. "You said."

"Some spells are dangerous."

"Right."

"Some artifacts are dangerous."

"Right."

"Some knowledge shouldn't simply be handed to anyone who asks."

Harry frowned. "Why not?"

"Because people can misuse it!"

Harry considered. "All right."

Dracena blinked.

"That's fair."

She looked surprised.

Harry smiled slightly. "But that still doesn't explain why Hermione's parents matter."

Dracena stared.

Harry continued. "She's not asking for dangerous spells."

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is?"

Dracena opened her mouth, but nothing came out again. She looked like her brain had skipped the tracks.

Harry waited.

She looked toward Hermione. Hermione was watching quietly.

Harry continued. "Why should Hermione's accomplishments count for less because her parents are Muggles?"

Dracena swallowed. "Because..."

Harry waited.

She tried again. "Because magical heritage..."

"Is important. I know."

He looked at her. "But why does that make Hermione less important?"

Dracena stared at him.

She was furious. Harry was always doing this. Always asking her questions to things she knew, but couldn't explain. Not that Potter would listen anyway. Or understand. That was infuriating.

Because Potter was standing there looking at her. Waiting.

...And she realized he was right. Again.

Dracena's face burned.

Then she remembered what he'd said about her family.

"*A bunch of old families congratulating themselves for having old ancestors*."

Her eyes stung. That wasn't what her family was! That wasn't what their traditions meant!

Father had shown her ancient books. Beautiful enchanted tapestries. Family records going back centuries. Things people had preserved through wars and disasters. Things that would have vanished if nobody had cared enough to keep them. And there was Potter dismissing all of it as though it were nothing.

As though her family were nothing.

Dracena looked at him.

Her voice was quiet. "You really don't understand."

Harry frowned. "Then tell me."

She swallowed. "I just did."

Harry sighed. "No. You told me your family has a history. You didn't tell me why that makes Hermione inferior."

Dracena's eyes filled. She blinked furiously. Harry noticed.

His expression softened. "Dracena..."

"Don't."

Harry stopped.

She lifted her chin. "You're an idiot, Potter."

Harry said nothing.

Dracena waited. Normally he'd say something back.
Something clever.
Something irritating.
Something that would let her laugh and forget how badly he'd hurt her.

But he didn't. He simply looked at her, and that was worse.

Much worse.

Dracena swallowed. "Well."

She straightened. "I suppose there's no point discussing this with someone who knows absolutely nothing about the wizarding world."

Harry looked at her. "Maybe."

She blinked.

"But I know Hermione."

Dracena stared at Harry

Harry smiled sadly. "And I think that matters more."

Dracena's face crumpled for just a moment.

Then she turned. "Come along, Pansy."

Pansy looked confused. "Dracena?"

"Now!" she shouted

They walked away. Dracena held herself perfectly straight. Her head high. Her shoulders back. Every inch the aristocratic young lady, until they turned the corner.

Then she ran.

"Wait!" Pansy yelled after her.

Harry watched Dracena disappear. He felt strangely miserable, but couldn't understand why.

Ron, however, looked delighted. "Well, that shut her up."

Harry said nothing.

Hermione looked at him. "Harry?"

He turned. "Yeah?"

She smiled. "Thank you."

Harry shrugged. "For what?"

"For defending me."

Harry looked surprised. "Of course."

Hermione smiled. "You didn't have to."

Harry frowned. "Yeah, I did."

She looked at him.

"I can't stand the way she talks about you."

Hermione nodded. "Neither can I."

Ron snorted. "She's horrible."

Harry sighed. "Yeah."

Hermione watched him, then smiled slightly. "But you still like her."

Harry froze. "What?"

Hermione's smile widened. "You do."

Harry went red. "I do not!"

Hermione grinned. "I still think she likes you, too."

Ron stared. "WHAT?"

Harry glared. "Hermione!"

She laughed.

Harry pointed at her. "Don't start!"

Ron looked horrified. "Harry!"

Harry turned. "What?"

"Malfoy?"

Harry covered his face. "Oh, for heaven's sake."

Ron stared. "Dracena Malfoy?"

Harry groaned.

Hermione laughed.

Ron looked as though he'd just discovered Harry had been secretly raising a dragon in his bed.

"Harry!"

Harry dropped his hands. "I DON'T LIKE HER!"

Hermione smiled sweetly. "Of course not."

Ron shook his head. "Blimey."

Harry stared at both of them, then sighed.

"You're both impossible."

Hermione laughed.

Ron grinned.

Harry sat down.

After a moment, he smiled too.

Because whatever else happened, he had Ron and Hermione.

Dracena Malfoy could not stop thinking about the argument she'd had with Harry Potter.

"Why should Hermione's accomplishments count for less because her parents are Muggles?"

It was an irritating question. An extraordinarily irritating question.

Mostly because Potter had asked it.

Because he *was* wrong. Wasn't he?

Obviously.

He simply didn't understand. He hadn't grown up surrounded by magic. He hadn't spent his childhood listening to stories about the great wizarding families, learning their histories, studying the spells and traditions they'd preserved for centuries.

He didn't understand what it meant to be a Malfoy. He'd dismissed all of it as a bunch of old people congratulating themselves for having old

ancestors.

Dracena still felt a little sting whenever she remembered that.

Still, the question scratched around in her head, like a pebble in her shoe.

"Why should Hermione's accomplishments count for less?"

Dracena tried to ignore it, but she couldn't.

So she began watching Hermione Granger. At first, she told herself she was looking for mistakes. For evidence that Granger wasn't quite as clever as everyone believed.

Surely there was something. Some weakness. Some gap in her ability. Some indication that generations of magical education really did matter.

In Charms, Hermione performed spells with extraordinary precision.

In Transfiguration, she mastered difficult transformations before almost anyone else.

In Potions, she understood concepts Dracena had been taught since childhood. That was particularly irritating. Dracena had grown up surrounded by magic. She'd had private tutors. An enormous family library. Parents who could answer her questions. People who'd been teaching her about the wizarding world since before she was old enough to hold a wand.

Granger had none of those things. Her parents were dentists, for heaven's sake. *Dentists*. Dracena wasn't entirely certain what dentists did, although she understood it involved Muggles' teeth.

And yet somehow their daughter was among the best students at Hogwarts.

It was ridiculous. It was infuriating. Dracena was beginning to suspect, it was also rather extraordinary.

One afternoon, during Charms, Professor Flitwick posed a particularly difficult question about the limitations of permanent enchantments.

Dracena knew the answer, or at least, most of it. She'd read about the subject in one of Father's books. She raised her hand.

So did Hermione. Flitwick called on Hermione.

Of course he did.

Hermione answered. And she kept answering.

Dracena slowly lowered her hand, because Hermione hadn't merely given the correct answer. She'd explained the underlying magical principles, identified two important exceptions, and even mentioned an obscure historical example Dracena had never heard of.

Flitwick positively beamed. "Excellent, Miss Granger! Absolutely excellent! Five points to Gryffindor!"

Hermione smiled. Dracena stared at her.

Oh, for Merlin's sake.

Beside her, Pansy Parkinson made a disgusted noise. "That stupid Mudblood."

Dracena glanced at her. Pansy scowled. "Honestly. Flitwick practically falls over himself giving her points."

Dracena looked toward the front of the classroom. Flitwick had already moved on to another student.

She frowned. Had he favored Hermione? He'd asked a question. Hermione had answered it. Correctly. Rather brilliantly, in fact. Five points seemed perfectly reasonable.

Dracena looked back at Pansy. "I don't think he was favoring her."

Pansy blinked. "What?"

"Flitwick. She answered the question."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Oh, honestly, Dracena."

She leaned closer. "Of course she did. She's always got her hand up, hasn't she? Desperate to prove she's just as good as the rest of us."

Dracena looked toward Hermione. She was writing something in her notes. Harry leaned over and whispered something to her. Hermione smiled, then she whispered something back.

Harry laughed.

Dracena frowned. *Stupid Potter.*

Pansy continued her tirade. "It's embarrassing, really. All that showing off. You'd think someone would tell her that no matter how many books she reads, she's still just a..."

"Mudblood." Dracena finished quietly.

Pansy smiled. "Exactly."

Dracena looked at Hermione again. She thought about the question. The answer. The five points.

All the things Hermione Granger had accomplished without the advantages Dracena had enjoyed her entire life.

For the first time, the word sounded rather ugly. Father used it occasionally. So did some of his friends. It was simply something people said. But now, sitting beside Pansy, listening to her use it to explain away an accomplishment neither of them could honestly criticize, Dracena found herself strangely uncomfortable.

It hadn't made Hermione's answer any less brilliant. It hadn't made Flitwick's praise any less deserved. It hadn't explained anything at all. It was just a nasty little word to throw at someone when you had nothing better to say.

Dracena looked down at her notes.

She thought of Father. Of the Malfoy family library. Of the ancient books and spells and histories she'd been taught to treasure.

She was proud of those things. She would always be proud of them. But she'd never thought that being a Malfoy meant she ought to resent someone else for being clever.

Quite the opposite. Father had always insisted that excellence was something to be admired.

Hermione Granger, irritating though she was, was undeniably excellent.

Dracena frowned. Well, that's inconvenient.

Three rows ahead, Harry Potter was laughing at something Ron Weasley had whispered. Dracena glared at the back of his head. " *Stupid Potter.*" *she said to herself.*

Somehow, once again, Harry Potter had managed to make her question something she'd never thought to question before. The worst part was that he wasn't even near her to argue with.

Pansy was still talking. "...and honestly, I don't know why they even let people like that into Hogwarts. My father says standards have been slipping for years. It's no wonder when they keep admitting every little Mudblood who..."

"Pansy?"

Pansy turned. "Yes?"

Dracena looked at her. "Do shut up."

Pansy stared. "What?"

Dracena returned to her notes. "You heard me."

Pansy's mouth fell open. "Dracena!"

"Honestly, Pansy. You're giving me a headache."

Pansy looked scandalized. "I was only saying..."

"I know what you were saying." Dracena dipped her quill into the ink. "That's the problem."

Pansy stared at her. For several seconds, neither spoke.

Then Pansy huffed and turned away.

Dracena continued writing.

Granger.

She paused, then continued taking notes.

The Lesson



Neville Longbottom was beginning to regret signing up for extra credit. At the time, it had seemed like an excellent idea.

Professor Lupin was a good teacher. Neville liked him. Unlike some professors, Lupin didn't seem to believe that being frightened or getting something wrong was a personal failing.

Neville also desperately needed the extra credit. His marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts weren't terrible, but they weren't particularly good either, and his grandmother had been rather emphatic about the importance of improving them.

Unfortunately, Neville hadn't realized that the advanced class would involve **actual** Dementors. He stared at the enormous wooden cabinet at the front of the classroom.

Something inside it moved. Neville swallowed.

"Oh, dear."

"You're not the only one thinking that." Neville turned. Harry Potter was standing beside him. Neville managed a weak smile.

"You're frightened too?"

Harry looked at the cabinet. "Well, yeah."

Neville blinked, and Harry shrugged.

"Have you **seen** those things?"

That made Neville feel slightly better. Only slightly.

Hermione Granger was sitting at a desk, reading an enormous book she'd brought with her. She had already covered several pages in notes. Neville had no idea how she'd managed to take notes before the lesson had even begun.

Standing near the window, looking thoroughly displeased with the entire arrangement, was Dracena Malfoy.

She examined the enormous cabinet inside the classroom, then her eyes traveled to the three Gryffindors. "Oh, wonderful."

Harry looked over. "Morning, Malfoy."

"Potter."

"Nice to see you too."

Dracena folded her arms. "Of all the students in Hogwarts, I appear to have been assigned to this class with the three of you."

Hermione looked up. "You weren't assigned. You volunteered."

Dracena gave her a cold look. "Father insisted."

Harry smiled. "Couldn't say no?"

Dracena's eyes narrowed. "Some of us have parents who take our education seriously, Potter."

Harry's smile faded. Dracena noticed. For a moment, she looked as though she might apologize. Instead, she lifted her chin. "Particularly when it concerns dangerous magic. Old families have enemies, you know."

Harry shrugged. "Must be exhausting."

"It is."

"All those people not liking you." Harry grinned, as Dracena glared at him

Neville watched them with mild bewilderment. They always did this. He wasn't entirely sure why.

Professor Lupin entered before Dracena could respond. "Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Professor." Hermione said brightly.

Lupin looked around.

"Four students. Excellent."

His eyes fell on Dracena. "Miss Malfoy. I'm pleased to see Slytherin represented."

Dracena lifted her chin. "Father believes advanced defensive magic is essential for anyone from a family of consequence."

Lupin regarded her for a moment. "I should think it essential for anyone who might encounter danger, regardless of their family."

Dracena looked faintly annoyed. "Naturally."

"Good. Then we agree."

Harry coughed. Dracena glared at him.

Lupin smiled.

"Now. Dementors."

The room became very quiet.

Something moved inside the cabinet. Neville's stomach tightened. Harry's wasn't doing much better. Lupin turned toward it.

"Before anyone becomes alarmed, I want to explain precisely what we're doing today." He tapped the cabinet with his wand. Several glowing symbols appeared across its surface. One looked like letters that moved when Harry tried to read them. The second was a circle surrounding a triquetra. The third was a series of interconnected circles. The last looked like a feather of some kind of magical beast; perhaps a hippogriff.

"These are containment and resistance charms. The Dementors inside have been bound to a limited manifestation. They cannot administer the Kiss, make physical contact, or feed upon you beyond a carefully controlled threshold."

Hermione raised her hand. "Professor, Dementors aren't ordinarily susceptible to that sort of binding."

"Quite right." Lupin smiled. "Which is why this is an advanced lesson." He gestured toward the glowing symbols. "The charms are experimental. They've been developed specifically for supervised defensive instruction.

What you encounter today will feel real, but the danger has been greatly reduced."

Neville stared at the cabinet. "Reduced? Not Eliminated?"

Lupin looked at him. "Yes, Neville. The fear will be real. The cold will be real. Some unpleasant memories may surface. But I will be here, and the containment will prevent anything worse."

Neville swallowed. "Right."

Lupin's expression softened. "That's why we're doing this one at a time."

He turned toward the blackboard.

With a flick of his wand, words appeared: EXPECTO PATRONUM

"The Patronus Charm is among the most difficult defensive spells you will ever learn."

Hermione's hand shot up. "Isn't it normally taught much later?"

"Yes."

"Then why are we learning it now?"

"Because I believe some students are capable of more than the curriculum expects." He looked at all four of them. "...and because learning how to face fear is valuable even when you don't succeed immediately."

Neville wished he'd chosen a different extra-credit class. Perhaps Herbology. He was good at Herbology. Most plants didn't suck happiness out of people.

"Neville, would you like to begin?"

Neville's heart sank. "Me?"

"Yes."

Neville looked toward the cabinet, then toward the door, then back at Professor Lupin.

"Do I have to?"

"No."

That surprised him.

Lupin pulled a chair closer. "Sit down for a moment." Neville obeyed, and Professor Lupin sat opposite him.

"Tell me what you're afraid of."

Neville looked embarrassed. "The Dementor."

"Of course. Anything else?"

Neville hesitated. "Getting it wrong."

Lupin nodded. "Why?"

Neville looked down. "Because everyone else will probably get it right."

Behind him, Dracena made a faint noise. Neville didn't look.

Lupin leaned forward. "Neville, listen to me. This is difficult magic. Very difficult. I don't expect any of you to produce a fully formed Patronus today."

Hermione looked mildly disappointed. Lupin noticed and smiled. "Even you, Miss Granger."

Hermione blushed.

"Now." Lupin continued, "the charm requires a powerful positive thought. A happy memory, usually, but it can be anything. Something that can stand against the despair a Dementor creates."

Neville nodded.

"You must hold onto that memory. Not merely remember what happened, but remember how it felt."

"Right."

"Have you chosen one?"

Neville hesitated, then gently nodded.

"Good." Lupin stood. "Let's try."

Neville approached the cabinet. His legs felt like jelly. Harry gave him a thumbs-up. Hermione smiled encouragingly. Dracena watched with an expression of polite skepticism.

Lupin raised his wand. "Ready?"

Neville wasn't. "Yes, Professor."

The cabinet opened. Cold spilled into the classroom. Neville's breath caught. A dark, hooded figure emerged. It floated several inches above the floor. The air thickened around it. Neville felt the happiness drain out of him. Suddenly he was thinking about his grandmother.
About how disappointed she'd be.
About his parents.
About all the things he couldn't do.

The Dementor approached. Neville raised his wand. "Expecto..."

His voice cracked. The Dementor came closer.

"Expecto Patronum!" Nothing happened. The cold deepened. Neville stumbled backward.

Lupin raised his wand. The glowing symbols on the cabinet brightened for a moment, and The Dementor recoiled. The cabinet doors slammed shut. Warmth returned.

"That's Enough." Professor Lupin said.

Neville stood trembling. "I'm sorry."

Lupin looked at him. "For what?"

"I couldn't do it."

"Of course you couldn't."

Neville blinked.

Lupin smiled. "It's your first attempt."

"But..."

"Neville, failure isn't something to be ashamed of."

Neville looked down. Lupin continued. "Failure teaches us things. Tell me, what did you learn?"

Neville thought. He could still feel the cold. He could still remember the horrible sense that nothing good would ever happen again.

"I think..."

Lupin waited.

"I think I got stuck in my own head."

"How so?"

"I was thinking about how frightened I was."

Lupin nodded.

"And?"

"And then I was thinking about how I was going to fail."

"Yes."

"And then I couldn't remember the happy thing anymore."

Lupin smiled. "Excellent."

Neville stared. "Excellent?"

"Yes. You've identified exactly what went wrong."

Neville considered that.

Lupin continued. "Fear is not something to be ashamed of, Neville. It's a perfectly natural response to danger."

A short laugh came from the window. Dracena had covered her mouth. Not quite quickly enough.

Everyone turned. Harry glared. Hermione frowned. Neville's face burned. Lupin looked at Dracena. "Something amusing, Miss Malfoy?"

Dracena straightened. "Not at all, Professor."

"Then perhaps you'd care to explain?"

She hesitated. "I merely thought that being afraid of something that cannot actually hurt us was rather silly."

Harry's expression hardened. "He's trying, Malfoy."

Dracena looked away. Lupin regarded her for a moment. "Fear rarely waits for our permission to be rational, Miss Malfoy."

Dracena said nothing.

"Something worth remembering when it's your turn."

Her cheeks reddened.

Lupin turned back to Neville. "Now. Shall we try again?"

Neville looked at the cabinet, then at Lupin. He wasn't ready, but he was going to do it anyway.

"All right."

Lupin smiled.

"Good." He placed a hand on Neville's shoulder. "Neville, you come from a long line of powerful witches and wizards."

Neville looked up.

"Your family has produced people of extraordinary courage and ability."

Neville swallowed. "I know."

"But you aren't required to become them."

Neville blinked.

"You have your own strengths. I've seen them in class. You pay attention. You listen. You keep trying even when something frightens you."

Neville looked down. "That doesn't seem very impressive."

"It is to me."

Neville looked up again.

Lupin smiled. "I know this is frightening. But I also know you can do this."

Neville took a breath. "All right."

"Find your memory." Neville closed his eyes. He thought about a morning in the countryside.

He'd been very young. There was a meadow behind his grandmother's house. He remembered walking through it just after sunrise. The grass was wet. The air smelled of flowers and the damp earth. There were little yellow flowers everywhere, and purple ones, and delicate white blossoms whose names he'd later learned.

He remembered kneeling beside them, and examining their leaves. He remembered feeling the warmth of the rising sun on his face. He'd simply been Neville, and he'd been happy.

"Ready?" Lupin asked.

Neville opened his eyes. "Yes." he lied.

The cabinet opened. The Dementor emerged. The cold returned. Neville felt the fear rise, but this time he held onto the meadow.

The flowers.
The sunlight.
The smell of wet grass.

He raised his wand. " **Expecto Patronum** !"

Silver light burst from the tip.

A shimmering cloud of mist emerged all around him. It spread across the classroom, beautiful and luminous. The Dementor stopped. Then retreated back into the safety of the cabinet.

Neville stared. The silver mist swirled around him, then dissipated.

Lupin blinked. "Oh." He looked genuinely surprised.

Neville stood motionless.

"Did..." He looked at Lupin. "Did I do it?" Lupin stared at the cabinet, then at Neville, then he laughed heartily.

"Well!"

Neville looked worried. "Was it wrong?"

"Technically?" Lupin considered. "Yes."

Neville's face fell.

"But!" Lupin raised a finger. "It worked."

Neville blinked. "It did?"

"It most certainly did."

Lupin looked delighted. "That wasn't a fully formed Patronus. Not even close. But it was powerful enough to repel a Dementor."

Hermione began applauding. Harry joined her. Neville went scarlet.

Lupin smiled broadly. "Excellent work, Neville."

Neville looked down at his wand.

He'd done it. Neville Longbottom felt rather proud of himself.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione practically leapt from her chair. "Yes, Professor!"

Harry grinned.

"Try not to explode anything."

Hermione glared. "I won't."

Dracena muttered: "Disappointing."

Hermione ignored her.

Lupin smiled. "Have you chosen your memory?"

"Yes."

"Good. Remember, the emotional strength of the memory matters more than its complexity."

Hermione nodded, and She closed her eyes. It wasn't a memory. Not exactly. It was a vision. She imagined a library, an enormous library filled with books. Shelves rising almost impossibly high, and warm golden light spilling through tall windows. A soft, well-worn leather chair beside a fireplace.

The smell of paper. Old bindings. There were books everywhere. Books she'd never read. Books she hadn't even heard of. An entire lifetime of things to learn. Nobody telling her she was strange for wanting to know them.

Hermione smiled.

Lupin opened the cabinet, and the Dementor emerged.

Hermione raised her wand.

" **Expecto Patronum** !" Silver light erupted immediately. It gathered, twisting around Hermione. Suddenly a small, shining otter bounded across the classroom.

Harry laughed. "Brilliant!"

The otter leapt toward the Dementor. The creature recoiled. The otter circled it, almost playfully, driving it backward into the cabinet.

Lupin shut the doors and Hermione lowered her wand.

The otter vanished.

For a moment nobody spoke. Lupin smiled. "Extraordinary, Miss Granger."

Hermione beamed. Harry applauded. Neville joined him enthusiastically.

Even Dracena looked impressed, although she quickly concealed it.

"An otter?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled. "My favorite animal."

"Hermione laughed.

Dracena rolled her eyes. "How terribly predictable."

"Mr. Potter."

Harry stood. "Right."

Lupin looked at him. "Ready?"

Harry considered the cabinet. "Probably not."

Lupin smiled. "An excellent beginning."

Harry laughed nervously.

He'd been looking forward to this class. He liked Professor Lupin, and enjoyed learning practical magic. He also desperately needed the extra credit after his latest Potions marks. Snape had written "DREADFUL" across his last essay in letters large enough to be read from across the classroom. Harry had been particularly annoyed because he'd actually tried.

Now, however, he was beginning to wonder whether there were easier ways to improve his marks.

Lupin approached. "Have you chosen a memory?"

Harry nodded. He thought about Hagrid telling him he was a wizard, about how wondrous at all felt as he discovered Hogwarts. He thought about his friends, about Ron and Hermione.

But then his thoughts drifted toward his parents. He'd seen photographs. He'd heard stories. He knew they had loved him. He tried to imagine them.

His mother smiling.
His father laughing.
A house where nobody called him a freak.
Where nobody locked him in a cupboard under the stairs.

He thought about being where he belonged.

Harry swallowed. "Ready."

The cabinet opened. Cold swept across the room. Harry raised his wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing.

The Dementor approached. Harry heard something. A scream, then a woman's voice. His stomach dropped, and he fell to the floor.

Lupin slammed the cabinet shut. Harry stumbled to his feet.

"Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm fine."

Lupin studied him. "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded.

"Again."

The second attempt was worse. The scream came sooner. Harry nearly dropped his wand.

Lupin stopped the exercise. Harry stood breathing hard. Hermione looked worried. Neville looked frightened for him.

Dracena was watching. She wasn't smiling.

Lupin approached.

"Harry, you don't have to continue."

Harry shook his head. "I want to."

"There's no shame in stopping."

"I know."

Lupin waited.

Harry looked at the cabinet, then at his wand.

He thought about his parents. He tried to imagine something else.

He imagined his mother holding him. He imagined his father lifting him into the air. Laughter. A family. Something he'd never really had the chance to remember, but something he desperately wanted to believe had existed.

Harry closed his eyes. "All right."

Lupin hesitated, then nodded.

The cabinet opened.

The Dementor emerged.

The cold came. Harry felt the scream beginning somewhere at the edge of his mind. His happy vision pushed it away, with the thought of his mother smiling and his father laughing.

" **EXPECTO PATRONUM** !"

Silver light exploded from his wand. It gathered in the air,and swirled around the room. It manifested slowly. Four legs, then antlers. A magnificent stag stood in the silvery light. The creature leapt forward.

The Dementor recoiled. The stag lowered its antlers and charged toward it. The cabinet doors slammed shut behind the fleeing creature. The stag stood in the classroom for another moment, shining brilliantly, then faded.

Harry stared. "Blimey."

Hermione was on her feet. "Harry!"

Neville applauded.

Lupin looked almost overcome. "Excellent, Harry."

Harry was still staring at the place where the stag had stood.

"That was..." He swallowed. "That was my dad, wasn't it?"

Lupin's expression softened. "Your father was associated with a stag, yes."

Harry looked down at his wand. For a moment he couldn't speak. Across the room, Dracena watched him. She'd seen Potter do extraordinary things before. She remembered him flying for the first time. She remembered him duelling. Remembered how he'd charge into situations any sensible person would avoid.

But this was different. He'd failed. Twice. He'd looked genuinely disturbed by the experience.

And he'd tried again, and he'd produced something magnificent.

Dracena felt a strange warmth in her chest. She immediately suppressed it.

"Show-off." she said, to herself.

"Miss Malfoy." Dracena stood.

"Finally."

She'd spent the entire lesson watching three Gryffindors demonstrate their abilities.

Longbottom had managed something. Granger had produced a perfect Patronus. Potter had produced an enormous stag. Dracena was not going to be the only student who failed.

Absolutely not.

She approached Lupin.

He looked at her. "Have you chosen a memory?"

"Naturally."

"Good."

Dracena lifted her chin. "I've been practicing the incantation."

"I'm pleased to hear it."

She glanced toward Harry. He smiled encouragingly. Dracena immediately looked away.

Idiot. Stupid Potter.

Lupin raised his wand.

"Ready?"

"Of course."

Dracena closed her eyes. She thought of Diagon Alley. She'd been six. Father had taken her shopping, just the two of them. He'd bought her a beautiful little silver bracelet from a jeweller's shop, then a box of chocolates.

Then he'd taken her to look at broomsticks. She remembered holding his hand. Remembered how enormous he'd seemed.

How important. How safe. She'd asked for something terribly expensive. He'd laughed, then bought it anyway. She remembered thinking that Father could do anything; That nothing bad could happen while he was there.

Dracena smiled.

"Ready."

The cabinet opened. Cold swept across the classroom. Dracena's smile vanished. The Dementor emerged, and she felt something horrible, a sudden certainty that everything good would disappear.

That people would leave. That she'd be alone. That she would disappoint everyone who mattered.

She raised her wand.

"Expecto... uh... Patronum!"

Nothing. The Dementor approached, and Dracena felt her stomach twist.

Her father's smiling face vanished. The memory collapsed. She stumbled backward.

Lupin shut the cabinet, and Dracena stood rigid.

Her face was pale. Her hands trembled. She hid them behind her back.

Lupin approached. "Miss Malfoy?"

"I'm fine."

"That wasn't what I asked."

"I'm perfectly fine."

Lupin sighed. "All right."

Dracena lifted her chin. "I simply wasn't prepared."

"Of course."

"I'd like to try again."

Lupin studied her. "First, tell me what happened."

Dracena stiffened. "Nothing happened."

"Miss Malfoy."

She glared. "My memory wasn't sufficiently strong."

"Perhaps."

"Then I'll choose another."

"Good."

Dracena looked away.

Lupin waited.

She said nothing.

He sighed. He approached her, and crouched down next to her. "Look, Miss Malfoy, I don't know what your difficulty is."

Dracena's eyes flashed. "I don't have a difficulty."

"Then stop treating every question as an accusation."

Harry looked down, trying to hear what they were saying. Hermione raised her eyebrows. Neville stared at his shoes.

Dracena went red.

Lupin continued. "I'm trying to help you."

"I don't need..."

"Yes, you do."

Lupin's voice softened. "And that's perfectly all right."

Dracena stared.

He continued. "You're capable of this. I know you are."

She looked away. "Clearly."

"Miss Malfoy."

She looked back.

"Listen."

Dracena sighed.

Lupin smiled faintly. "If you can't hold onto a happy memory, try something else."

"Such as?"

"Something that would make you happy."

Dracena frowned.

"That's what I was doing."

"Not necessarily something that happened."

She blinked. "What?"

"Imagine something."

Dracena stared. "Imagine?"

"Yes."

"Something that hasn't happened?"

"Precisely."

Dracena looked skeptical. "That seems rather childish."

Lupin smiled. "The best magic often is."

Harry snorted. Dracena glared.

Lupin continued. "Clear your mind. Don't force a memory. Let yourself imagine something that would make you genuinely happy."

Dracena considered. "Anything?"

"Anything."

She nodded. "Fine."

Lupin stepped back.

Dracena closed her eyes. She tried to imagine something pleasant.

The Manor.
Christmas.
Her mother.
A beautiful dress.
A new broom.

Nothing seemed right.

She cleared her mind again.

Then, quite without warning, she imagined Harry Potter.

Dracena's eyes opened. Oh, absolutely not.

She closed them again, and tried to think of something else.

Her father's study.
A summer holiday.
The gardens.

Harry Potter. Stop that.

She tried harder.

She wasn't thinking about Harry arguing with her. Or Harry laughing at her. Or Harry chasing her on a broom.

She was imagining something else. A warm summer afternoon. Hogsmeade. She was older. Perhaps fifteen or sixteen. Harry was walking beside her. He was holding her hand.

Dracena felt her cheeks warm. "This is ridiculous." she thought to herself, but she let the thought continue.

They were sitting together outside a newly built café at Hogsmede. Harry was smiling at her. It was a smile that was only meant only for her. She was smiling too.

He leaned closer. Dracena's heart jumped

He kissed her. Just a little kiss. Soft. Warm. And in the imagined future, Dracena Malfoy did something she had never once done in real life. She stopped worrying about what anyone thought, and she kissed him back.

She was happy.

Completely.
Utterly.
Ridiculously happy.

And then the Dementor came. Dracena opened her eyes.

She raised her wand.

"**EXPECTO PATRONUM** !"



The classroom exploded with silver light that overwhelmed everything.

A magnificent peacock burst from Dracena's wand, its feathers spreading in a vast shimmering fan.

Silver light filled the room. Professor Lupin brought his hand across his eyes to shield himself from the bright silver light.

The creature cried out. The sound was almost musical.

The Dementor recoiled. The cabinet began shaking.

Lupin stared. "What..."

The peacock spread its wings, and light poured from its feathers.

The containment charms flared, and failed. The dementor screamed an otherworldly, high pitched scream.

The dark shape of the dementor folded into itself, as it shrieked, shrinking until it vanished into thin air.

The cabinet doors flew open. Empty.

The classroom fell silent.

Silver feathers drifted through the air as the peacock vanished.

Dracena stood motionless. Her wand was still raised. Her hair had come loose from its ribbon. Her face was flushed, and she looked absolutely astonished.

Harry stared.
Hermione stared.
Neville stared.

Lupin slowly lowered his wand.

For several seconds nobody spoke.

"Well..." Lupin said. He looked at the empty cabinet, then at Dracena.

"Well, well."

Dracena swallowed. "Professor?"

Lupin approached the cabinet.

He examined the broken, glowing symbols, then laughed in sheer astonishment.

"Extraordinary."

Dracena blinked. "Did I do it?"

Lupin turned.

"Miss Malfoy, you didn't merely do it." He gestured toward the cabinet.

"You completely overwhelmed the containment. And the Dementors themselves.

Dracena looked alarmed. "Did I kill them?"

"No. Dementors don't die in quite the way ordinary creatures do. The manifestation has been forced back into the incorporeal plane from which it

was drawn."

He looked at her. "I've never seen a Patronus do that."

Dracena stared. "Never?"

"Never." he said, dumbfounded.

Harry grinned. "Blimey, Malfoy."

Dracena turned. Harry was looking at her with genuine admiration.

"That was brilliant." Something inside Dracena's chest did a peculiar little flip.

She immediately lifted her chin. "Naturally."

Hermione laughed. Neville applauded.

Lupin shook his head. "Miss Malfoy, I don't believe I could have produced a result quite like that myself."

Dracena's eyes widened, then she smiled, a tremendous smile.

"Well." She smoothed her robes. "I suppose some of us are simply more gifted."

Harry rolled his eyes. "There she is."

Dracena smiled sweetly. "Jealous, Potter?"

Harry laughed. "A little, actually."

Dracena blinked. She hadn't expected him to admit it. "Good."

The four students left Lupin's classroom together.

Neville was still looking at his wand. "I can't believe I did it."

Hermione smiled. "You were wonderful."

Neville blushed. "It wasn't a proper Patronus."

"It repelled the Dementor." Harry said.

Neville looked up.

Harry grinned. "That's what matters, isn't it?"

Neville smiled.

"Yeah."

Dracena walked slightly ahead of them. Her head was held high. She was enormously pleased with herself. She'd produced the strongest Patronus in the class, possibly the strongest Patronus Lupin had ever seen.

Father would be delighted. She could already imagine telling him. She might even get one of the new "Cumulonimbus 2020's" out of it

Then she remembered what she'd been thinking about. Her smile faltered. Oh, bother.

Hermione turned toward Neville. "What was your memory?"

Neville smiled shyly. "A meadow."

Harry looked at him. "A meadow?"

Neville nodded. "Near my grandmother's house. I used to go there in the mornings. There were flowers everywhere."

Hermione smiled. "That's lovely."

Neville looked embarrassed. "I suppose."

Harry shook his head. "Don't be embarrassed. It worked!"

Neville smiled, then he looked at Hermione.

"What about yours?"

Hermione brightened. "A library."

Harry laughed. "Of course."

Hermione glared. "There's nothing wrong with liking books."

"Didn't say there was."

"It was beautiful. Huge windows, comfortable chairs, shelves everywhere... Ron would have fallen asleep just hearing about it."

Harry grinned.

Neville looked at Harry.

"What about you?"

Harry hesitated. "My parents."

Hermione's expression softened.

Harry looked down. "I imagined what it would've been like if they were still alive."

Nobody spoke for a moment.

"That's a good one." Neville said, quietly.

Harry smiled. "Yeah."

Dracena was listening. She felt a strange ache in her chest.

Potter had imagined his parents. She'd imagined kissing Potter. Something about that seemed terribly unfair.

Hermione turned toward her.

"What about you, Dracena?"

Dracena froze. "What?"

"Your Patronus. What did you think about?"

"Oh."

Dracena's mind went completely blank.

Harry looked at her. Neville looked at her. Hermione waited.

Dracena swallowed.

She lifted her chin.

"I was thinking about returning home."

Harry blinked. "Home?"

"Yes."

Dracena waved a hand. "To the Manor."

Hermione frowned slightly.

Dracena continued. "Where I have servants to attend to my needs, and I don't have to concern myself with this ridiculous Dementor nonsense."

Harry stared.

Dracena smiled triumphantly.

An entirely reasonable explanation.

Then Harry said: "You're lying."

Dracena's stomach dropped. "What?"

Harry smiled. "You're lying."

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are."

Dracena went red. "How dare you!"

Harry shrugged. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you lying?"

"I'm not!"

Hermione was watching with considerable interest.

Neville looked confused.

Harry grinned. "Come on, Malfoy."

Dracena glared. "Potter."

"Was it something embarrassing?"

"No!"

Harry's grin widened. "Oh, it was."

"It was not!"

"Something silly?"

"No!"

"Something about your father?"

Dracena hesitated.

"No?"

"Potter!" Dracena said, angrily

"Something about Quidditch?"

"No!"

"Something about winning the House Cup?"

"Absolutely not!"

Hermione chimed in, smiling widely. "You were thinking about Harry, weren't you?"

Both Dracena and Harry stopped walking at the same moment

Her face went scarlet. His face didn't do much better.

Hermione's eyebrows rose, and she grinned even more widely.

Neville looked between them.

Dracena stared at Harry, then Hermione.

For one terrible moment, she couldn't think.

Hermoine stared back, then her smile widened.

"Oh."

Dracena's heart stopped.

"Oh, what?"

Hermione grinned.

"It **was** about Harry!"

Dracena nearly screamed. "IT WAS NOT!"

Hermione covered her mouth, giggling.

Neville looked alarmed.

Harry was gobsmacked.

"What was he doing?"

Dracena stared. "WHAT?"

"In your memory."

"It wasn't a memory!"

Hermione blinked.

Dracena realized her mistake.

Too late.

Hermione smiled and grinned evilly.

"Oh?"

Dracena wanted the ground to swallow her.

Hermione continued. "So it was something you imagined."

Dracena closed her eyes.

Idiot.
Idiot.
Idiot.

Hermione was now smiling openly.

Harry looked delighted.

"What was he doing, Malfoy?"

Dracena lifted her chin. "Being an idiot."

Harry laughed. "That's not very happy."

"It is for me."

"Really?"

"Immensely."

Harry considered. "Was I falling off my broom?"

"No."

"Getting detention?"

"No."

"Being eaten by a dragon?"

Dracena almost smiled.

"Yes." she lied.

Harry grinned. "Come on."

"No."

"Tell me."

"No!"

"Please?"

Dracena looked at him. That was unfair. Potter wasn't supposed to say please. Especially not with that smile. And those eyes. She looked away.

"I was imagining you being quiet."

Harry laughed. "That's impossible."

"Precisely. That's why it made me so happy."

Neville chuckled.

Hermione shook her head, smiling at the ground

"Well, whatever it was, it must've been something."

Dracena looked at him. "What?"

"Your Patronus." He smiled. "That was the most powerful thing I've ever seen."

Dracena froze.

Harry continued. "Really. It was amazing."

For a moment, she forgot to be embarrassed. Harry was looking at her with genuine admiration.

Dracena felt her face warm again.

"Oh."

Harry smiled. "Well done, Malfoy."

She swallowed. "Thank you, Potter."

They walked in silence for several steps.

"Still think you were imagining me falling off my broom."

Dracena rounded on him. "POTTER!"

Harry burst out laughing. Hermione joined him. Even Neville smiled.

Dracena glared at all three of them.

Then, despite herself, she laughed too.

That evening, Dracena lay on her bed in the Slytherin dormitory. She stared at the canopy.

She'd done it. She'd produced an extraordinary Patronus, A magnificent peacock.

Professor Lupin had been astonished. Potter had been impressed. Father would be proud. Everything should have been wonderful.

Except...

Dracena closed her eyes. She could still see it.

The imagined afternoon.
The café.
Harry's smile.
His hand in hers.

The kiss.

She pulled her pillow over her face. "Oh, for Merlin's sake."

She'd been thinking about Harry Potter. Not merely thinking about him. Imagining going on a date with him. Imagining kissing him, and somehow that had produced the most powerful magic she'd ever performed.

Dracena groaned into her pillow.

This was a disaster. A complete disaster.

Granger.

Hermione had been smiling. That horrible, knowing smile. Dracena stared at the curtains around her bed.

"Oh, no."

She lay back down, and pulled the blanket over her head and made a solemn decision.

She would never, under any circumstances, tell another living soul what she'd been thinking about.

Especially Harry Potter.

Most especially Harry Potter.

She could not possibly tolerate him discovering that the happiest thing she could imagine...

The thing that had filled her with so much joy that she'd driven an entire Dementor out of existence...

Was Harry Potter kissing her.

Dracena buried her face in the pillow again. "Stupid Potter."

And somewhere in Gryffindor Tower, Harry was telling Ron Weasley about the extraordinary silver peacock Dracena had conjured.

He had absolutely no idea that he'd been responsible for it.

Which, Dracena decided, was the only good thing about the entire afternoon.

Year 4

The Bureaucracy

Neville Longbottom was angry. This was unusual enough that Harry Potter stopped walking.

Neville was sitting at one of the library's larger tables, surrounded by parchment, books, and several official-looking documents bearing the seal

of the Ministry of Magic. He was writing furiously. Every few seconds, he stopped, scratched something out, consulted another document, and muttered under his breath.

Harry approached. "All right, Neville?"

Neville didn't look up. "Hello, Harry."

Harry glanced at the parchment. "That doesn't look like Herbology homework."

Neville laughed. It wasn't a particularly happy laugh. "No."

Harry pulled out a chair. "What is it?"

Neville put down his quill. "Paperwork."

Harry looked at the enormous pile. "Blimey. What for?"

Neville hesitated, then sighed. "St. Mungo's."

Harry's expression changed. "Your parents?"

Neville nodded. "Gran's trying to get their treatment authorization renewed."

Harry frowned. "I thought they were already being treated."

"They are." Neville rubbed his forehead. "But the National Wizards Health Service changed the forms again. Gran sent in the old ones, and they rejected them."

Harry stared. "They rejected them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because they're the wrong forms."

Harry blinked. "But they were the right forms when she sent them."

Neville nodded. "Yes."

Harry considered this. "That's stupid."

Neville laughed bitterly. "Tell me about it."

He picked up another sheet. "Now we have to submit a new application for continued long-term restorative care. They've suspended authorization for some of the specialist treatments until it's approved."

Harry stared. "But your parents need those treatments."

"I know." Neville's voice tightened. "Gran's been trying to sort it out for weeks."

Harry looked at the paperwork. There were dozens of pages. Some had little boxes. Some had enormous boxes. Some seemed to require information that was already written on other forms.

One had been returned with a large red stamp: **INSUFFICIENT SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION.**

Harry frowned. "What documentation?"

Neville pointed. "That one."

Harry looked. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Neville shook his head. "They wanted the original."

Harry stared. "Isn't that the original?"

"No. That's the certified copy."

Harry blinked. "What's the difference?"

Neville looked at him. "Apparently, about six weeks and five galleons."

Harry sat down. "Oh."

At the next table, Hermione looked up from her Arithmancy notes. "Neville?"

He turned. "Yes?"

"Surely your caseworker can help?"

Neville stared.

Hermione continued. "St. Mungo's must have someone assigned to your parents. And your father was an Auror, wasn't he? Surely the Ministry has some sort of service for injured Aurors."

Neville put down his quill, very carefully. "You'd think so."

Hermione frowned. "What?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" His voice had become unusually sharp.

Harry looked at him. Neville was almost never angry. Not like this. Neville took a slow, but sharp breath. "The Ministry cut the Auror Rehabilitation Office's budget last year."

Hermione blinked. "They did?"

Neville nodded. "Gran says they reassigned half the staff." He looked down. "Our caseworker has nearly five hundred former Aurors and their families to look after."

Harry stared. "Five hundred?"

Neville nodded. "Five hundred."

Hermione looked horrified. "That's impossible."

Neville laughed. "Apparently not."

He picked up a letter. "His last owl took two months to answer."

Hermione frowned. "Two months?"

"...and six days. Yes." Neville's voice began to shake. "And when he finally answered, he said he'd be happy to help, but we'd have to submit the new forms first."

Harry stared. "But that's what you need help with."

Neville looked at him. "Yes!" His voice rose, exasperated.

Madam Pince glanced toward their table.

Neville lowered his voice. "Yes, Harry. That's exactly what we need help with."

He looked down at the parchment. "Gran's getting older. She's not very good with all this new paperwork. And I thought..." He swallowed. "I thought I could help."

Hermione's expression softened.

"Neville..."

"But I don't understand half of it!" His voice cracked. He gestured toward the forms. "Look at this!"

Harry leaned forward. Neville pointed at a paragraph.

"'Provide documentation establishing continuing eligibility under subsection seventeen of the Magical Health and Welfare Appropriations Act.'"

He looked at Harry. "What does that mean?"

Harry stared. "I haven't a clue."

"Neither do I!" Neville looked miserable. "And if we get it wrong again, they'll send it back again."

Hermione reached for the form. "May I?"

Neville nodded.

She began reading. Harry watched her expression change, from concentration, to confusion, to irritation, then finally to outright disbelief.

"This is dreadful."

Neville laughed. "Yes."

Hermione looked up. "Why are there three different places to list the same medical history?"

Neville shrugged. "I don't know."

"And why does this require an attending Healer's signature when the next page requires a departmental certification of the same information?"

Neville looked at her. "I don't know, Hermione." he said, exasperated.

She frowned. "And this section..."

"I DON'T KNOW!" The library went silent.

Neville froze. Hermione stared. Harry looked at him.

Neville's face turned scarlet. "I'm sorry."

Hermione shook her head.

"No, Neville, I'm sorry. I wasn't..."

Neville looked down. His hands were trembling. "I'm just..."

He swallowed. "I'm so tired of this. I'm overwhelmed."

At the table behind them, Dracena Malfoy had been listening. She hadn't intended to. She was supposed to be working on a Transfiguration essay. She had an open textbook, three sheets of parchment, and a half-finished explanation of the limitations of human-to-animal transformations. Neville Longbottom had been getting progressively louder. The conversation had become rather difficult to ignore.

Dracena looked over her shoulder. "Longbottom?"

Neville stiffened. Harry turned.

"Malfoy."

Dracena ignored him. "Why doesn't your grandmother simply speak to someone at the Ministry?"

Neville stared.

Dracena continued. "Surely she knows someone who can straighten this out."

Neville looked at her. For several seconds, he said nothing, then he laughed. It was a horrible laugh.

Dracena frowned. "What?"

Neville shook his head. "Of course."

Dracena blinked. "Of course what?"

Neville looked at her. "Of course you'd say that."

Dracena's expression hardened. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Neville stood.

Harry blinked. "Neville?"

Neville ignored him. He was looking directly at Dracena. "Well, that's easy for you, isn't it?"

Dracena frowned. "Excuse me?"

"'Just talk to someone at the Ministry!'" Neville laughed again. "Why didn't we think of that?"

Dracena stared.

Neville continued.

"'Just send an owl to someone important! Have Father arrange a meeting! Perhaps invite one of the Ministers to tea!'"

Dracena's cheeks warmed. "Longbottom..."

"That's how it works for you, isn't it?"

She straightened. "I beg your pardon?"

Neville's voice shook. "You can just ask someone to fix things!"

Dracena stared. "Well, if there's been an administrative mistake..."

"THERE HASN'T BEEN A MISTAKE!"

Madam Pince looked up sharply.

Neville lowered his voice, but only slightly. "That's the problem!"

He pointed at the paperwork. "This is how it's supposed to work!"

Dracena said nothing.

Neville continued. "Gran and I have to fill out all these forms. We have to wait for someone to read them. We have to hope we haven't made a mistake. And if we have, we start all over again!"

He swallowed. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Dracena's face tightened. "Longbottom, I was only..."

"Of course not!" Neville looked at her. "You're Dracena Malfoy!"

Harry stood. "Neville..."

"No, Harry." Neville's eyes were wet. "She should hear this."

Dracena went very still.

Neville continued. "You might be able to walk into the Ministry and have someone fix everything for you, Your Highness."

Dracena flinched. "But the rest of us..." His voice broke. "The rest of us ordinary people have to do things properly."

Dracena stared.

Neville laughed bitterly. "There's no shortcut for us."

Dracena looked down at the paperwork. She'd never really thought about it. Of course Father knew people at the Ministry. He knew everyone. If there

were ever a problem with something official, he sent an owl. Sometimes he visited someone. Occasionally someone came to the Manor, and then the problem went away, or got fixed. That was simply how things worked.

Wasn't it?

Harry spoke quietly. "She shouldn't have to." Harry was looking at the forms. "Neville's grandmother shouldn't have to know someone important."

He looked at Hermione. "Doesn't everyone pay into the Magical Health Service?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. It's funded through Ministry revenues and the contributions taken from working witches and wizards."

Harry turned back to Neville. "Then it should work."

Neville stared.

Harry continued. "Your parents were Aurors. They were hurt doing their jobs. They need care." He gestured toward the forms. "Why should you have to spend your afternoon doing this?"

Neville looked down.

Harry's voice grew firmer. "You should be doing your homework."

He looked toward Dracena. "Or playing Quidditch. Or doing whatever you want."

Dracena said nothing.

Harry continued. "Nobody should have to spend weeks begging the Ministry for treatment they're already supposed to receive."

Hermione nodded. "He's right."

Neville swallowed.

Dracena looked at him. For the first time, she noticed something she'd never really considered before. Neville Longbottom wasn't simply a clumsy boy who was bad at Potions. He was a boy whose parents were in hospital.

Whose grandmother was raising him.
Who was spending his afternoon fighting a bureaucracy because nobody else had time to help.

She had just suggested he ask someone important to make the problem disappear as though it were obvious.
As though everyone could do that.

Dracena felt suddenly ashamed. "Neville?"

He looked at her.

She hesitated. "Perhaps I could..."

Neville's expression changed. "Do what?"

Dracena blinked. "I was only going to..."

"Do what, Princess?"

Harry frowned. "Neville."

Neville ignored him. "Take pity on us?"

Dracena recoiled. "No!"

Neville laughed. "Why not?"

She stared.

Neville stepped closer. "Why would you want to help my family?"

Dracena opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Neville's voice shook. "My parents fought against yours."

Dracena went pale. "Longbottom..."

"They fought Voldemort!"

Several students gasped. Neville didn't care.

"And your family supported him!"

Dracena stared.

Neville continued. "My parents were tortured until they couldn't even recognize their own son!" His voice broke. "And now I have to sit here filling out forms so they can keep getting treatment!"

Dracena looked horrified.

Neville's eyes filled. "So what are you going to do?" He laughed bitterly. "Ask your father to put in a good word?"

Dracena swallowed. "That's not..."

"Or perhaps he'll make a donation!"

Her face went white.

Neville continued. "Maybe we can have a nice little plaque at St. Mungo's thanking the Malfoys for their generosity!"

"Neville!"

Harry's voice cut through the room.

Neville stopped.

Harry was standing beside him. He looked serious. "That's enough."

Neville stared.

Harry continued. "She's trying to help."

Neville looked at Dracena. She was standing motionless. Her eyes were bright. She looked like a girl who'd just been slapped.

Neville swallowed,then looked away.

"I'm sorry."

Dracena said nothing.

Neville looked at Harry. "I'm sorry."

He sat down, very slowly and covered his face.

"Neville?"

He looked up.

Hermione smiled gently. "Let me help."

Neville shook his head. "Hermione, you've got your own work."

She waved a hand. "I've nearly finished."

Harry looked at her enormous stack of books. He doubted that very much.

Hermione pulled the forms closer. "Now. Let's see what we can do."

Neville smiled weakly. "Thanks."

Harry sat down.

"Anything I can do?"

Hermione looked at him. "Actually, yes."

Harry blinked. "What?"

She handed him a stack of documents. "Put these in chronological order."

Harry stared. "That's it?"

Hermione smiled. "For now."

Harry grinned. "Brilliant."

The three of them got to work.

The next morning, Neville got an anonymous Owl.

> Longbottom,
>
> Speak to Edmund Wetherby in Slytherin.

His father works in the Department of Magical Health, and his mother is a senior nurse at St. Mungo's. He knows how to get the correct forms and which offices to send them to.

He's expecting you at lunch tomorrow.

Don't be late.

–Anonymous.

Neville Longbottom was staring at the letter.

Harry sat down beside him. "Morning."

Neville didn't answer.

Harry glanced at the parchment. "What's that?"

Neville handed it to him. Harry read. Then read it again.

He smiled. "Oh."

Neville scowled. "Don't."

Harry blinked. "Don't what?"

"Don't smile like that."

Harry tried to stop smiling. He wasn't particularly successful.

Hermione leaned over. "What is it?"

Harry handed her the letter. She read it. Her eyebrows rose.

"Oh!"

Neville groaned. "Not you too."

Hermione looked toward the Slytherin table. Dracena Malfoy was eating breakfast. She was chatting with Pansy Parkinson, looking perfectly unconcerned with the affairs of Neville Longbottom.

Hermione smiled. "Well, that's rather nice of her."

Neville looked horrified. "Nice?"

Hermione blinked. "Yes."

Neville stared. "She called me a pathetic excuse for a wizard last week!"

Harry shrugged. "Well, you did call her Princess."

Neville glared. "She deserved it!"

Harry considered this. "Probably."

Neville blinked.

"But she was trying to help."

Neville looked down at the letter. "That's what makes it worse."

Hermione frowned. "Why?"

Neville stared at her. "Because I need it!" He looked toward Dracena. "Because she's right!"

Harry stopped smiling.

"I've spent three weeks trying to get someone at the Ministry to answer my questions. Three weeks!" He gestured at the letter. "And she just..." He shook it. "She just sends a note to someone!"

Hermione looked at him.

Neville's voice tightened. "One conversation. That's all it took."

Harry said nothing.

Neville looked down. "She probably didn't even have to ask twice."

Hermione hesitated. "Neville..."

"She probably just said, 'Do this for me,' and he did!"

Harry considered that. "Actually, that does sound like her."

Neville glared.

Harry raised his hands. "Sorry."

Neville looked toward the Slytherin table again. Dracena laughed at something Pansy had said. She didn't look toward them.

Neville's expression softened slightly. Then hardened again. "I don't want to owe her anything."

Harry nodded. "I know."

Neville looked at him.

"But you don't have to like her."

Neville frowned. "What?"

"You don't have to like her to accept her help."

Neville looked down at the letter.

Harry shrugged. "She doesn't like you much either."

Hermione shot him a look. "Harry!"

"What?"

Neville almost smiled.

"And anyway, you're not doing it for her."

Neville looked at him.

"You're doing it for your parents."

Neville went quiet. Harry watched him. After a moment, Neville folded the letter very carefully, then slipped it into his pocket. "I suppose."

Hermione smiled. "Good."

Neville looked toward Dracena again.

"Stupid Malfoy." he muttered.

Harry grinned. "Funny. She says that about me all the time."

"Longbottom?" Neville looked up.

A tall Slytherin boy stood beside him. "Edmund Wetherby."

Neville nodded. "Hello."

Edmund sat down. "Malfoy says you need help with some forms."

Neville stiffened. "She told you?"

Edmund shrugged. "More or less."

Neville frowned. "What exactly did she say?"

Edmund sighed. "'Wetherby, you remember those Transfiguration notes I let you copy last term?'"

Neville blinked.

"'Well, now you can return the favor.'"

Neville stared.

Edmund shook his head. "Honestly, I should've known better than to borrow anything from that girl."

Neville couldn't help it. He laughed.

Edmund took out a folder. "Ok, so let's see what you have here."

Later that week, Harry caught Dracena at lunch. "Malfoy."

She looked up. "Potter."

Harry sat down next to her. "Neville got his paperwork sorted."

Dracena continued writing. "How fascinating."

Harry smiled. "He wanted me to thank you."

Dracena's quill stopped. She looked up. "Did he?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, not exactly."

Dracena narrowed her eyes.

Harry grinned. "He said you're an insufferable, arrogant, meddling little princess."

Dracena's face hardened. "How charming."

"But he also said his grandmother cried when she got the approval letter."

Dracena went very still.

Harry watched her.

"Well." She dipped her quill into the ink. "Good."

Harry smiled. "Yeah."

Dracena resumed writing. "Now go away, Potter. You're distracting me."

Harry stood.

"Thanks, Dracena."

She didn't look up. "Stupid Potter."

Year 5

The Hipogriff



Harry Potter had been looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures all week. Mostly because Hagrid was teaching it.

Care of Magical Creatures also involved going outside, which was much better than sitting in a classroom listening to Professor Binns explain

something that had happened four hundred years ago. Harry was going to enjoy the class, despite the fact that Dracena Malfoy, and many of her Slytherin classmates shared the class with him.

"Potter."

Harry turned.

"Malfoy."

Dracena stood with Pansy Parkinson and two other Slytherin girls. Her pale hair was tied back with a dark green ribbon, and she was looking at Harry with the expression she reserved for things she found beneath her dignity.

Which was most things.

"Looking forward to spending the afternoon with your enormous friend?" She said, icily.

Harry smiled. "Yes, actually."

"How charming. I do hope he remembers to wash his hands before touching anything."

"Don't worry. I'll remind him to keep them away from you."

Dracena's eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

"Wouldn't want him catching anything."

Ron snorted.

Dracena glared at Harry. "You're revolting."

"Morning to you too."

She swept past. Harry watched her go.

Ron shook his head. "Honestly, why do you bother?"

Harry shrugged. "She started it."

"She always starts it."

"Well, somebody has to finish it."

Hermione, walking beside them, sighed. "You're both ridiculous."

There was something about Hermione's tone he didn't quite follow.

Hagrid was waiting beside a fenced enclosure at the edge of the grounds. Behind him stood several enormous creatures.

Harry stopped. "Blimey."

Ron stared. "What are those?"

Hermione was already reaching for her textbook. "Uh, according to my copy of 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them' that's a Hippogriff."

They were magnificent. Each had the body and hindquarters of a horse, but the front legs, wings and head of a great bird of prey. Their feathers shone in the afternoon sunlight, and their enormous claws dug into the earth as they moved.

One was particularly striking. Sparkling feathers that reminded Harry of burnished steel. A pale head with bright orange eyes. Harry couldn't stop looking at him.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" Hagrid said proudly.

Harry nodded.

Dracena, standing several feet away, said nothing.

Harry glanced at her. She was staring at the creatures.

"What's wrong, Malfoy?"

"Nothing." She gave him a poisonous look.

Harry grinned back at her. Dracena rolled her eyes.

Hagrid clapped his enormous hands. "Right! Gather round!"

Most of the students moved closer. Dracena did not.

"Now, these here are hippogriffs. Very proud creatures. Very intelligent. An' very particular about manners."

Dracena perked up slightly at that.

Hagrid continued. "Yeh mustn't insult 'em. Never approach one with anger or malice in yer heart. They can sense it, see? An' they won't tolerate disrespect."

Dracena frowned. "How does one insult a hippogriff?"

Hagrid looked at her. "Same way yeh insult anyone else, Miss Malfoy."

Ron coughed. Harry looked at the ground. Dracena glared at both of them.

Hagrid continued. "Yeh need ter approach slowly. Look 'em in the eye. Bow. Then wait fer them ter bow back."

"And if they don't?" Hermione asked.

"Yeh back away. Slowly. Don't turn yer back. Now, who wants ter try?"

Nobody moved. Hagrid looked around.

"Harry?"

Harry swallowed. "Me?"

"Go on. Yeh'll be fine."

Harry looked at the enormous claws and blinked. Hagrid was smiling at him. Harry stepped forward, slowly.

"This one's name is Buckbeak." Hagrid said.

Dracena watched, wide eyed.

Harry approached the steel grey hippogriff. He bowed, not taking his eyes off the creature.

It stared at him

Harry waited, then, slowly, the hippogriff lowered its head.

Hagrid beamed. "Excellent, Harry!"

The class applauded. Harry exhaled. He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath. Hagrid encouraged him to approach and stroke the creature's neck.

The feathers were surprisingly soft. He smiled at the creature.

"Hello, Buckbeak."

Behind him, Dracena continued staring. "I was positive Potter was about to get eaten." she said to a Slytherin girl next to her.

The other students began taking turns. Hermione managed beautifully, of course. Ron took a little longer, but eventually Buckbeak bowed to him too. Even Neville, after considerable encouragement, managed a nervous bow and received one in return.

Dracena watched, cautiously. She wasn't afraid of animals. There were horses at the Manor. She'd had equestrian lessons for as long as she could remember. Equestrian lessons didn't prepare her for "horses" with huge beaks. Or horses with claws. Or wings.

Most horses generally didn't stare at you as though deciding which part to eat first.

"Miss Malfoy?" Dracena jumped.

Hagrid smiled, oblivious. "Yer turn."

She looked at Buckbeak. "No, thank you."

Pansy stared. "Dracena!?"

Dracena immediately regretted speaking. "I mean, I don't see the point."

Hagrid frowned. "Point's ter learn how ter handle magical creatures."

"Yes, well, I already understand the instructions."

"Then give it a try."

Dracena glanced toward Harry. He was watching. Of **course** he was watching. He had that stupid little smile on his face.

Her face turned hot

"Come on, Malfoy." Harry called. "It's easy."

That did it. Dracena straightened. "Of course it's easy, Potter." She stepped forward. Buckbeak raised his head, quickly, sharply. Dracena stopped. He was enormous. He looked far larger than any horse she'd ever seen in her life. She could see the sharp edges of his beak. She glanced quickly at his claws, and looked away quickly.

Her stomach tightened. She took another step.

Buckbeak watched her.

"Bow, Miss Malfoy!" Hagrid instructed, excitedly.

Dracena did. Barely. Just a tiny inclination of her head.

Buckbeak didn't move. She frowned.

"Well?"

"Wait." Hagrid said.

Buckbeak continued staring. His head raised higher.

Dracena could hear people behind her. She felt her face getting hotter.

"Honestly." she muttered. Buckbeak shifted, his clawed foot pawing at the ground. Dracena jumped. Someone laughed. She turned redder.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, you oversized chicken."

Hagrid's expression changed. "Miss Malfoy..." Hagrid said, cautiously.

Dracena took another step toward Buckbeak. "Come on, you stupid chicken. I've bowed, haven't I?" Buckbeak's wings spread. Dracena froze.

"Back away." Hagrid said sharply.

Dracena's eyes opened wide. She couldn't move.. The enormous wings filled her vision. The creature shrieked. Dracena screamed in response.

Everything seemed to happen at once.

The beast's steel gray feathers blurred as it moved. Dracena was aware of claws flashing past her vision, then pain. As something struck her arm, she fell backward.

Hagrid shouted at Buckbeak, who moved back slightly.

Students screamed.

Dracena Malfoy, who had spent thirteen years learning how to look composed under any circumstances, curled into a ball on the grass and sobbed.

The injury to her arm wasn't particularly serious. That was what Madam Pomfrey said. Three deep scratches along Dracena's forearm, some bruising, and a great deal of shock. There would be no permanent damage.

"I could have been killed!" Dracena shrieked.

Madam Pomfrey applied another dressing. "Well. You weren't."

"It attacked me!"

"Yes, dear."

"That creature is dangerous!"

"Most magical creatures are dangerous if mishandled. That's part of why we have these classes."

Dracena stared at her. "Are you suggesting this was my fault?"

Madam Pomfrey looked at her over her spectacles. "I'm suggesting you rest your arm."

Dracena lay back against her pillows. Her face was pale. Her eyes were red. Worst of all, Harry Potter had seen everything.

She could still hear the laughter. Not that anyone had really laughed after Buckbeak attacked, but before. They'd laughed before.

And Potter had been watching. Dracena swallowed. "Wait until my father hears about this." she said.

Her father heard about it. Dracena sent him a lengthy owl about the incident. Dracena's owl described an enormous, vicious creature that had attacked her without warning during a dangerously mismanaged lesson conducted by an incompetent groundskeeper.

Lucius Malfoy was furious. Within days, owls arrived at Hogwarts.

Ministry officials quickly followed.

Hagrid was temporarily removed from teaching while the incident was investigated. Dracena received an owl from her father assuring her that the matter would be handled appropriately.

She read it three times. It made her feel considerably better. That was, until Harry Potter found her in the corridor.

"Malfoy."

Dracena turned. "Potter."

Harry looked at her bandaged arm. "How's the terrible injury?"

Dracena lifted her chin.

"Painful."

"Really?"

"Excruciating."

"That's funny."

"What is?"

"Madam Pomfrey said you'd be fine in a few days."

Dracena glared. "Madam Pomfrey is not the one who was nearly torn apart by a vicious monster."

Harry folded his arms. "Funny. I thought Buckbeak was rather nice."

"Of course you did."

"He liked Hermione too."

"How wonderful for Granger."

"And Ron."

"Congratulations to Weasley."

"And Neville."

Dracena's eyes narrowed. Harry smiled in response.

"Even Neville. Your point, Potter?" Dracena said, icily.

Harry's smile faded. "My point is that Buckbeak didn't attack anyone else."

Dracena went still. "Excuse me?"

" *Everyone else* followed Hagrid's instructions."

"I followed his instructions!"

"You called Buckbeak stupid."

"He was being stupid!"

"You called him an oversized chicken."

"Well, he looks like one!"

Harry stared at her.

Her face went red.

Harry sighed. "Dracena."

She froze.

"Hagrid told you not to insult him."

"I know what Hagrid said!"

"Then why did you do it?"

Dracena opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Harry waited. She looked away.

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

"No. I guess you don't." Harry continued. "But Hagrid might lose his job because of this."

Dracena's expression hardened. "Then perhaps he shouldn't have brought dangerous animals into a classroom."

"He's teaching Care of Magical Creatures!"

"That doesn't mean he should allow students to be attacked!"

"He didn't!"

Dracena recoiled slightly.

Harry took a breath. "He told you exactly what to do. You didn't listen."

Dracena's eyes filled with angry tears.

She hated that. She hated crying, especially in front of Potter.

"You weren't the one who got hurt!"

"No." Harry admitted.

"Then you don't know what you're talking about!"

Harry looked at her. For a moment he seemed about to say something else, but stopped.

"Father is going to make certain that creature is destroyed."

Harry's expression changed. "Destroyed?"

"Yes."

"You mean killed."

Dracena hesitated. "That's generally what "destroyed" means, Potter."

Harry stared at her. "Because you were embarrassed?"

Dracena went scarlet. "How dare you!"

Harry shook his head. "You're unbelievable."

He turned and walked away. Dracena watched him go.

Her heart was hammering.

Somewhere beneath the anger, she remembered what Harry had said. She remembered Hagrid's voice.

"*Back away, Miss Malfoy.*"

She hadn't.

I called him stupid.

Her face burned.

Potter was right. Again. And again, she absolutely hated him for it.

The investigation continued for several weeks. Dracena's injury healed, but her bandage did not disappear. In fact, it became considerably larger.

She was excused from Care of Magical Creatures, then from certain activities in Potions. Then, somehow, from helping clean up after a Charms

lesson.

Professor Flitwick seemed rather puzzled by this.

"Your arm is still troubling you, Miss Malfoy?"

"Terribly, Professor."

"Oh, dear."

Dracena sighed theatrically. "I'm managing. Somehow."

Pansy carried her books. Another Slytherin opened doors for her. Dracena discovered that an injured arm was remarkably convenient. She also discovered that people were less inclined to give her chores or tasks when she looked tragically wounded. There were advantages to suffering. Especially when one had suffered so terribly.

Then Harry caught her.

It happened on a Tuesday afternoon. Nothing important should happen on a Tuesday. Harry was leaving the library when he heard a familiar voice.

"Honestly, Pansy, I can manage." Dracena stood near a window, rearranging several books in her bag. Her bandaged arm was hanging at her side.

Her other hand was occupied, so she used the supposedly injured one to lift a heavy textbook. Then reached up and adjusted her hair.

Harry stopped, watched her, and smiled. "Oh, that's miraculous."

Dracena jumped. The book in her bandaged arm almost fell on the ground.

"Potter!"

Harry looked at her arm, then at the heavy book in her bandaged arm, then back at her.

"Madam Pomfrey must be a genius."

Dracena's expression went blank. "What?"

"Your arm." She looked down, then quickly tucked her arm against her chest.

Harry grinned. "Remarkable recovery."

Dracena narrowed her eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not." Harry said, smiling.

"It's still injured."

"Naturally."

"Some movements are less painful than others."

"Like lifting enormous textbooks?"

Dracena flushed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Or fixing your hair?"

"Potter!"

Harry laughed.

Dracena glared at him, turning red. "You're enjoying this."

"Immensely."

"You're a horrible person."

"Horrible people generally fake injuries to get out of classes."

Harry leaned against the wall.

"So, how long are you planning to keep this up?"

"Keep what up?"

"The tragic suffering."

Dracena looked offended. "I nearly lost my arm!"

Harry stared at her. "Madam Pomfrey said you had three scratches."

"Deep scratches."

"Right." Harry said, sarcastically.

"Extremely deep."

"Practically down to the bone, I'm sure."

Dracena lifted her chin.

"You're mocking a wounded girl."

Harry grinned. "You're using your injury to get out of homework."

"I am not!"

"And carrying books."

"I have a medical exemption!"

"And Care of Magical Creatures."

That did it. Dracena's smile vanished. Harry didn't notice immediately.

"Honestly, Malfoy, Buckbeak probably remembers you as the girl who called him a chicken."

Dracena went very still. Harry continued.

"I bet if you went back and apologized, he'd..."

"Stop."

Harry blinked.

"What?"

"Stop."

Dracena started shaking. Harry straightened. Dracena was staring past him. Her fingers had curled against her chest. She started breathing heavier

Harry frowned. "Dracena?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes were wide.

Harry suddenly remembered the enormous wings. Buckbeak's shriek. His claws. Dracena falling, then screaming. He remembered how she'd curled into a ball on the grass. How she'd cried.

"Dracena?"

She flinched.

Harry stopped moving. "Hey."

Her breathing was coming too quickly.

"It's all right."

She shook her head. "Don't."

Harry looked around. The corridor was empty. Pansy had disappeared, gone ahead at some point.

Harry stepped slightly closer. Dracena recoiled. He stopped immediately.

"All right. I won't."

She stared at him, eyes bulging in terror.

Harry lowered his voice. "You're at Hogwarts. You're in the corridor outside the library."

Her eyes blinked slowly, then turned toward Harry

"There's no hippogriff here."

Dracena swallowed.

Harry waited. He didn't know what else to do. For once, when dealing with Dracena, no clever remark came to his mind. He just stood there, watching her.

Dracena's breathing began to slow.

Her eyes filled.

"I hate that thing." She said, voice twittering on the edge of crying.

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"I hate it." Dracena wiped a tear away from her eye.

"I know."

Harry looked down at her hands. They were shaking.

Harry's stomach tightened. He'd thought she was simply being dramatic. And she was, But...

But not about everything.

"Come on." he said quietly.

Dracena looked up. "What?"

"There's a bench around the corner, outside"

"I don't need..."

"I know." He smiled faintly. "But I'm going to sit down for a minute. You can come if you want."

He started walking. A moment later, he heard footsteps behind him.

The bench overlooked one of the smaller courtyards.

Harry sat at one end, Dracena sat at the other.

They sat, neither of them speaking. Dracena stared at her shoes. Harry watched a bird hopping along.

Dracena said, "You're not going to tell anyone?"

Harry looked at her. "Tell them what?"

She gestured vaguely. "About that."

Harry considered. "No."

Dracena looked suspicious. "Really?"

"Really."

"Not even Weasley?"

"No."

"Or Granger?"

"No."

She studied him. Harry shrugged. "It's not their business."

Dracena looked away. "I wasn't afraid." Dracena said, unconvincingly.

Harry turned to look at her.

Dracena was staring straight ahead. "I wasn't."

Harry considered his answer. "All right."

She looked at him sharply. "You don't believe me."

"No." Harry said, neutrally.

Her mouth fell open indignantly.

Harry smiled slightly. "Dracena, you were terrified."

She went red. "How dare you..."

"It's all right."

She stopped.

"It's all right to be scared." Harry said, softly.

Dracena stared at him, and she gave a short, bitter laugh. "Easy for you to say."

Harry frowned. "Why?"

"Because you're never scared."

Harry blinked. "What?"

Dracena looked genuinely irritated. "Oh, come on, Potter."

"What?"

"Everyone knows." she said, bitterly.

"Knows what?"

"You're Harry Potter."

Harry sighed. "Here we go."

"You do ridiculous things all the time. You fight monsters. You fly around on broomsticks chasing who knows what. You go running toward danger like some sort of lunatic."

Harry grinned. "Thanks."

"And you're never afraid."

Harry stopped smiling. "That's not true."

Dracena looked at him.

"Really?"

"Really." Harry said.

She seemed unconvinced.

Harry leaned back. "Buckbeak scared the hell out of me."

Dracena blinked. "What?"

"Buckbeak."

"But you walked straight up to him like it was nothing!"

"Yeah."

"And bowed!"

"Yeah."

"And touched him!"

"Yeah."

"Then you weren't afraid!"

Harry laughed. "Dracena, have you seen the size of his claws?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"Well, so have I."

She stared..

"The thought HAD occurred to me that he might bite my head off."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because Hagrid told me how." he said.

Dracena frowned.

Harry shrugged. "I trust Hagrid. He knows animals. He told me what to do, so I did it."

She considered this. "You weren't frightened?"

"I just told you I was."

"But you didn't look frightened."

Harry thought about that. "Well, I was."

Dracena looked down.

Harry watched her for a moment. "I'm scared all the time."

She looked up. "You're joking."

"No."

Harry leaned forward. "When those Hogwarts letters started coming, I was scared."

Dracena frowned. "Of letters?"

"Not the letters themselves." He smiled faintly. "My aunt and uncle went completely mad. They wouldn't let me read them. They started moving us around. We ended up in this horrible little hut on a rock in the sea."

Dracena stared.

"Then Hagrid turned up." Harry smiled. "He broke the door down."

Dracena blinked. "Really?"

"Really."

Harry looked out into the courtyard. "Suddenly this enormous stranger was telling me I was a wizard, and that my parents were wizards, and that everything my aunt and uncle had told me was a lie."

Dracena was silent.

"I was terrified."

"But you went with him."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Harry thought. "Because I wanted to know."

Dracena watched him.

"And because staying with the Dursleys was worse." Harry looked at Dracena. "Not that I knew what would happen. I didn't."

Dracena looked at him.

"Then there was King's Cross."

"The station?"

"Yeah."

Harry laughed. "I had to run straight at a brick wall."

Dracena smiled despite herself. "Platform Nine and Three-Quarters."

"Exactly."

"You didn't know how to get through?"

"No."

"Oh, Potter."

Harry grinned. "Go on. Laugh."

Dracena laughed. Harry liked hearing it. It was different from the sharp, snobbish laugh she usually gave him. He found himself smiling too.

"Anyway." he continued, "I thought I was going to smash my face into the wall."

"But you did it."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because Ron's family told me how."

Dracena's smile faded slightly.

Harry noticed. He continued before she could say anything. "And I trusted them."

She looked down.

"I suppose that's the thing." Harry said, thoughtfully.

"What?"

"Being scared doesn't always mean you shouldn't do something."

Dracena frowned. "That sounds stupid."

"Probably." Harry shrugged. "But sometimes being scared tells you something matters."

She looked at him.

Harry searched for the words. He wasn't very good at this. Not like Hermione. "Sometimes I'm scared because something's dangerous. And that's useful. It makes me pay attention."

Dracena listened.

"Sometimes I'm scared because I don't know what's going to happen." He thought about Hagrid. The letters. The train. The Sorting Hat. "And sometimes I'm scared because if I don't do something, I'll spend the rest of my life wondering what would've happened if I had."

Dracena was very quiet.

"Sometimes I run toward what scares me because I'm afraid that if I stop and think too long, I might freeze."

He looked at her. "That doesn't mean I'm not frightened."

Dracena stared at him. "I froze."

Harry nodded.

"I couldn't move."

"Yeah."

"Hagrid told me to back away."

Harry said nothing, looking at her, listening.

"I heard him." She swallowed. "I knew what he was saying, but I couldn't..." Her voice cracked. "I couldn't make my legs move."

Harry felt something twist inside his chest. He'd never heard Dracena sound like this.

She looked down at her arm. "I thought it was going to kill me."

Harry spoke quietly. "I'm sorry."

Dracena looked up.

"I shouldn't have made fun of you for being scared."

She stared at him.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't know."

Her eyes filled again. She blinked furiously.

"Well."

Harry waited.

Dracena cleared her throat. "Thank you."

Harry smiled. "You're welcome."

They sat in silence.

"But Hagrid still didn't do anything wrong." Harry said.

Dracena stiffened.

Harry continued. "And Buckbeak doesn't deserve to die."

She looked away. "...yeah."

Harry looked at her.

She swallowed. "I shouldn't have called him stupid."

Harry said nothing.

"I was frightened. And everyone was watching. And you made it look so easy."

Harry almost smiled. "So you called him a chicken?"

Dracena's face reddened. "Don't."

"Sorry."

She looked at him. For a moment she thought he might laugh, but he didn't.

She sighed. "It was a very stupid thing to do."

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

She glared. "You don't have to agree so enthusiastically."

Harry grinned.

"Sorry."

Dracena's mouth twitched. She looked down again. "Father doesn't know."

Harry frowned. "Doesn't know what?"

"That I insulted Buckbeak."

"Oh."

"He thinks it attacked me for no reason."

Harry considered. "Are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know."

Harry nodded. "All right."

She looked at him.

"You're not going to tell me I have to?"

Harry shrugged. "He's your father."

Dracena seemed surprised.

Harry continued. "But Hagrid might lose his job."

She looked down.

"And Buckbeak might be killed."

"I know."

Harry waited.

Dracena sighed. "I'll think about it."

Harry nodded. "All right."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"That's it?"

"What?"

"You're not going to lecture me?"

Harry smiled. "Would it help?"

"No." She smiled, despite herself.

"Then no."

Dracena stared at him. She suddenly noticed how green his eyes were. She'd noticed before, of course. In Madam Malkin's. On the train. In corridors. In classrooms.

She had always thought Potter had unusually green eyes. But now? Now he was sitting beside her, looking at her without laughing, without mocking, without expecting anything.

He'd seen her frightened.
He'd seen her cry.
He'd heard her admit she was wrong.
And he hadn't used any of it against her.

He was being nice.

Genuinely nice. To *her* . Dracena felt her stomach do something peculiar.

Harry smiled. "You all right?"

She stared at him. His hair was sticking up. As usual.

His glasses were slightly crooked. As usual.

He looked ridiculous.

And...

Oh. *Oh, no*.

Dracena looked away so quickly she nearly hurt her neck.

Harry frowned.

"Dracena?"

Her face was burning. This was intolerable. Absolutely intolerable.

Harry leaned forward. "Are you feeling sick?"

That made it worse. He was worried about her.

Oh, for Merlin's sake.

Dracena stood abruptly.

Harry blinked. "What?"

She straightened her robes.

"Well." she said, sourly.

Harry looked up at her. "Well what?"

"I suppose you've enjoyed yourself."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"Having a good laugh at my expense."

Harry stared. "Dracena, I wasn't..."

"'Poor little Malfoy. Frightened of a bird. How terribly amusing.'"

Harry stood. "I didn't say that!"

"Of course not." Her voice sharpened. Something changed in Dracena, like a light went out. "You simply decided to take pity on me."

Harry looked genuinely confused. "Pity?"

"Yes, Potter. Pity."

"I wasn't pitying you!" Harry responded, confused. Lost.

"Then what were you doing?"

Harry opened his mouth, but no words came out. He'd seen someone frightened. He'd wanted to help. That was all. Wasn't it?

"I was trying to be nice."

Dracena's stomach twisted. That was somehow worse. "Well, don't."

Harry stared. "What?"

"I don't need your charity."

"Charity?"

"Or your sympathy."

Harry's expression changed. "Dracena..."

"I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself."

"I didn't say you weren't." Harry said.

"I don't need Harry Potter rescuing me from my own feelings."

Harry took a step back. "Fine."

Dracena felt a sudden, horrible pang. She wanted to take it back. She was so confused. She was angry at Harry, and angry at herself at the same time.

Harry folded his arms. "Fine, Malfoy."

The name stung. She'd gotten used to him calling her Dracena. Only for a few minutes. But she'd liked it. More than she wanted to admit.

"Good." she said.

"Brilliant."

"Wonderful."

"Anything else?"

Dracena lifted her chin.

"Yes."

Harry waited.

"Your hair is still ridiculous."

Harry stared at her, then he gave a short, humorless laugh. "Okay?"

Dracena turned and started walking. For one terrible moment she wanted to turn around, but she didn't.

"Goodbye, Potter." she said over her shoulder.

Harry looked at her.

"Bye, Malfoy."

She walked away. Quickly, before he could see her crying.

Harry stood beside the bench. He watched Dracena disappear around the corner. He sat down after she receded from view.

"What was THAT all about?" he asked nobody in particular.

The courtyard offered no explanation. Harry stared at the wall.

He thought about the conversation. She'd been frightened. He'd listened to her.

They'd talked. Actually talked. It had been... Nice. Really nice. Harry frowned. He'd liked hearing her laugh. He'd liked that she'd trusted him enough to admit she was frightened.

He'd liked...

Harry stopped, and thought about how Hermione kept teasing him about how he "liked" Dracena.

No. Absolutely not. This was Malfoy. Dracena Malfoy. The girl who insulted Ron's family. Who called Hermione names. Who treated everyone as though they were beneath her. Dracena, who was currently trying to have Hagrid dismissed and Buckbeak killed.

Harry was supposed to be angry with her. And he was. Obviously. He was furious.

Harry tried to feel furious. It wasn't working particularly well.

Instead he felt... Hurt? That was stupid. Why should he care what Dracena Malfoy thought of him?

Harry stood. "She's horrible." he muttered.

The empty corridor did not disagree. He started toward Gryffindor Tower.

"Completely horrible."

He walked faster.

"Insufferable."

That sounded better.

Dracena made it back to the Slytherin common room before she started crying properly.

She went straight to her dormitory, laid in her bed and buried her face in her pillow.

She was crying because Harry Potter had been kind to her, and she'd punished him for it.

She could still see his face. The confusion, then the hurt.

I was trying to be nice.

Dracena squeezed her eyes shut.

"Idiot." she whispered.

She wasn't entirely sure if she meant him, or herself.

After she stopped crying, she rolled onto her back and stared at the canopy.

Harry had been frightened too. He'd told her that. He'd admitted it without embarrassment, without shame.

Harry acted as though being afraid was simply something people experienced, as though it didn't make you weak. as though you could be afraid and still be brave.

Dracena thought about Buckbeak.
About freezing.
About Hagrid telling her to move.
About Potter bowing to the enormous creature despite being frightened.

And about what he'd said. " *Sometimes being scared tells you something matters*."

She looked at her arm. The scratches had almost completely healed. She'd been pretending otherwise for weeks.

Perhaps it was time to stop. Dracena sighed.

Tomorrow she'd write to Father. She wasn't sure what she'd say. She wasn't sure she could convince him to stop pursuing Hagrid. She wasn't even sure she wanted to admit everything.

She felt determined to go back to Care of Magical Creatures.

Eventually. Not tomorrow. Absolutely not tomorrow.

But someday.

She turned onto her side. Annoyingly, she thought about Potter again.

His ridiculous hair. His stupid glasses. Those green eyes. The way he'd said her name.

Dracena. She pulled the blanket over her head.

"Oh, shut up." She said to herself.

The matter of Buckbeak was eventually resolved.

The Hogwarts governors reviewed Hagrid's instructions, heard from the students who had witnessed the incident, and concluded that the hippogriff had reacted to provocation despite adequate warnings.

Hagrid was reinstated. Buckbeak was spared. Lucius Malfoy was furious.

Dracena received a lengthy owl expressing his disappointment with the school's judgment.

She read it twice, then put it away. For reasons she didn't entirely understand, she felt relieved.

A week later, Harry encountered her outside the Great Hall.

"Malfoy."

"Potter.

He glanced at her arm. The bandage was gone.

"Miraculous recovery."

Dracena narrowed her eyes. "Don't start."

Harry smiled.

"Going back to Care of Magical Creatures?"

She hesitated.

"Yes."

"Eventually."

"Right."

She glared. "Don't look so pleased with yourself."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

They stood there. For a moment neither seemed to know what to say.

Dracena lifted her chin.

"Your tie is crooked."

Harry looked down. "No, it isn't."

"It is."

She stepped forward. Without thinking, she reached up and straightened it.

Harry froze. Her fingers were inches from his face.

She could see his eyes. He could see hers. For one strange second, the corridor seemed very quiet.

Dracena stepped back. "There."

Harry swallowed. "Thanks."

She looked away. "Someone has to make you presentable."

Harry smiled. "Good thing you're here, then."

Dracena's cheeks went pink.

She glared at him. "Don't push it, Potter."

Harry grinned. "Wouldn't dream of it, Malfoy."

She walked away. Harry watched her go. This time, when she reached the corner, she looked back.

Harry was still watching. Dracena smiled. Harry smiled back. Then they both turned away, thoroughly embarrassed.

Neither understood what had just happened.

The Broom Ride



The wind was warm. Dracena Malfoy had never particularly liked riding on the back of someone else's broom. She was the type of girl who preferred being in control. She preferred knowing exactly where she was going, how fast she was getting there, and just how dangerous the flying was going to be.

This was different. Harry Potter was flying. Dracena was sitting behind him, her arms wrapped around his waist. They soared over the rolling green hills beyond Hogwarts, passing forests and sparkling rivers. Far below, sheep grazed in sunlit meadows, and little muggle villages nestled between the hills.

The sky was impossibly blue. Harry banked to the left, and pulled an extra half gee. Dracena tightened her grip.

She smiled. She looked at the ordinary landscapes and smiled happily. She tightened her arms again. Harry laughed. Dracena rested her head against his shoulder. She could feel him laughing.

She liked that. She liked the warmth of his back against her. She liked the way the wind tugged at her hair. She liked that, for once, neither of them had anywhere they needed to be.

Harry turned his head slightly. "Are you all right?"

Dracena looked at him. He was smiling, too.

She smiled back. "Yes."

Harry turned forward again.

They flew low over a lake. Sunlight glittered across the water, and Dracena watched the reflection of the clouds moving beneath them. She'd flown over beautiful places before, but she'd never enjoyed flying quite like this.

Harry knew where they were going. She trusted him. That was a strange thought. Dracena Malfoy trusted Harry Potter. She smiled to herself, then she moved a little closer and wrapped her arms more tightly around him, resting her cheek against his back.

She could hear his heartbeat, or perhaps it was her own. She wasn't sure. She closed her eyes. For once, she didn't care.

Harry's voice came again. "Dracena?"

She smiled. "Hmm?"

"Are you all right?"

She nodded against his back. "Perfectly."

The wind was warm. The sunlight was beautiful. Harry Potter was carrying her somewhere wonderful. She didn't know where. She didn't care. She held him tighter, her eyes closed, savoring the moment.

Harry spoke again. "Dracena?" His voice sounded different. "Dracena, are you all right?"

She opened her eyes suddenly. Harry Potter was standing over her.

Dracena stared. He was looking down at her with a slightly worried expression. Behind him were bookshelves. She was in the Hogwarts library. Dracena blinked.

Harry leaned closer. "Are you all right?"

Dracena looked around. Her cheek had been resting on an open textbook. A small piece of parchment was stuck to her forehead, and fell to the desk. Her quill had rolled onto the floor.

Harry smiled down at her. "You fell asleep."

Dracena stared at him.

"I know exams are tough, but I don't think Professor Flitwick will accept drool on your notes as extra credit."

Harry frowned, because Dracena didn't answer. "Dracena?"

She looked at him. His ridiculous hair. His tie was crooked. AGAIN. Those stupid green eyes. For one wonderful moment, she could still feel his back against her cheek. The way she'd held him. She realized none of it had happened. He hadn't taken her anywhere. He hadn't smiled at her like that.

He was just standing there, being Harry Potter.

She was sitting in the library, surrounded by textbooks, with an enormous examination tomorrow. Dracena felt something sting behind her eyes.

She blinked. No. It was too late.

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

Harry's expression changed. "Dracena?"

She stared at him.

"Hey, are you..."

"STUPID POTTER!"

Harry recoiled. "What?"

Dracena sat upright. Her face was bright red. **"Stupid, stupid Potter!"**

Harry stared.

"I..."

"Go away!"

He blinked. "Dracena, I was just.."

"I SAID GO AWAY!"

Harry straightened. "Right." He raised both hands helplessly. "Okay."

Dracena glared at him through watery eyes.

Harry took a step backward. "Well." He gestured vaguely toward her textbooks. "Good luck on exams." Another helpless wave of his hands. "I guess." He walked out of the library.

"Stupid potter." She said to herself, as she cried silently to herself.

Year 6

The Yule Ball



Harry Potter had faced enormous spiders, murderous wizards, and creatures that could suck the happiness out of a person. None of them had been quite as frightening as asking Cho Chang to the Yule Ball. He'd spent three days working up the courage.

He thought over the past three days of rehearsing what he would say. Three days listening to Ron offer advice that ranged from unhelpful to actively disastrous.

Now? He was finally standing in front of her.

"Cho?"

She smiled. "Hello, Harry."

Harry swallowed. "Er. Hello."

An excellent beginning, he thought. Absolutely brilliant.

Cho waited.

Harry took a breath. "I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"About the Yule Ball."

Cho's expression softened. "Oh."

Harry felt a brief surge of hope. "Would you like to go with me?"

Cho looked genuinely disappointed. "Oh, Harry."

His stomach sank.

"I'm sorry. Someone already asked me."

"Oh." Harry's stomach continued its dive into the earth's core.

"Cedric Diggory. I said yes."

Harry nodded. "Oh! Well then." He smiled. It was not a particularly convincing smile, but he was proud of having managed one at all. "That's all right."

Cho looked apologetic. "I really am sorry."

"No, no. It's fine." He nodded again. "Completely fine."

"Harry..."

"Hope you have a lovely time."

Cho smiled sadly. "Thank you."

Harry turned away.

He made it about six steps before his smile collapsed. *Brilliant* Three days. Three bloody days, and somebody had beaten him to it. Of COURSE it had to be Diggory.

He stared at the floor. Perhaps he could simply skip the ball. Surely there wasn't a rule requiring everyone to attend. He could stay in Gryffindor Tower. Maybe read a book. Get eaten by a dragon.

"Potter." Harry closed his eyes. *Oh, no*. Not now. Anyone but her.

He turned. Dracena Malfoy was leaning against a stone pillar, taking a bite out of an apple, wearing the expression of someone who had just discovered an exceptionally entertaining secret.

"Malfoy."

She smiled.

"Well, well."

Harry sighed. "How long have you been standing there?"

Dracena tilted her head. "Long enough." She took another bite.

"Wonderful."

"Turned you down, did she?"

Harry looked away. "Go away, Malfoy."

Dracena stepped closer. "Honestly, Potter. I almost feel sorry for you."

Harry said nothing.

Dracena continued. "But you're in luck."

Harry looked at her.

She smiled brightly. "I'm feeling generous today."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"I'll go with you."

Harry stared.

Dracena lifted her chin. "I mean, somebody has to, right?"

Harry blinked.

She continued, gathering momentum. "THE Harry Potter can't possibly go stag to the Yule Ball."

"Dracena..." Harry started. He felt anger rising in his ribcage.

"And my dress arrived this morning. Mother had it made specially for me."

Harry looked away. He felt the angry fire inside him growing.

"It's easily the finest in the castle, so at least one of us would look presentable."

"Malfoy..." he said, voice low.

"And of course everyone would be watching us. It would be quite the occasion, wouldn't it? Potter and Malfoy arriving together. I imagine people would talk about it for weeks." She smiled. "And really, Potter, you should be grateful. It's not every day someone like me offers to..."

"SHUT UP!" Harry shouted, rounding on her.

Dracena stopped. She dropped the apple she'd been eating.

Harry was staring at her. His face was red. His eyes were bright. "Just shut up, Malfoy!"

She blinked. "Potter?"

"I've had enough of your stupid jokes!"

Dracena's smile disappeared. "But I wasn't..."

"Can't you leave me alone for five minutes?"

She stared.

Harry's voice cracked. "Just five minutes without you laughing at me?"

"Harry, I..."

"GO AND FIND SOMEONE ELSE TO LAUGH AT!"

Dracena recoiled.

Harry was breathing hard. "AND STAY AWAY FROM ME!"

He turned, and walked away before she could see the tears forming in his eyes.

Dracena stood motionless. For several seconds she couldn't move. She'd been so pleased with herself. She'd finally found a way to ask Potter to the ball without actually having to ask him.

It had been perfect. She could offer. He could accept. Neither would have to admit anything embarrassing. And now...

Dracena swallowed.

"But..." Her voice was very small as Harry retreated out of sight. "I wasn't joking." She stared at the empty corridor. "I really wanted..."

She stopped. Her eyes filled. She looked down at her shoes. "Oh. Stupid Potter."

But there was no anger in it. Not really.

Harry found Hermione in the library. She was sitting beside a stack of books, working on an essay. "Hermione?"

She looked up. "Harry! What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

Harry sighed. "Right. Something. He sat opposite her. "Cho's going with someone else."

Hermione's expression softened.

"Oh, Harry."

"Cedric Diggory."

"Oh."

Harry looked at her. "Yeah."

Hermione considered. "Well, there are plenty of other girls."

Harry stared at the table. "I Suppose."

Hermione smiled. "Have you asked anyone else?"

Harry hesitated, then looked at her. "Hermione?"

She blinked. "Oh."

Harry swallowed.

"Would you..."

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry."

Harry closed his eyes. Of course.

"Ron already asked me."

Harry's eyes flew open. "RON?"

Hermione went pink. "Yes."

"Ron Weasley?"

Hermione laughed. "How many Rons do you know?"

Harry stared. "But..."

Hermione looked down at her book. "He asked me yesterday."

"And you said yes?"

She smiled. "Yes."

Harry blinked. "Wow."

Hermione blushed more deeply. "Honestly, Harry."

"No, I mean.." He stopped. He wasn't entirely sure what he meant.

Ron and Hermione?

Ron and Hermione?

He considered. Actually? That made a strange sort of sense. He'd noticed them spending more time together lately. Arguing, certainly. But they always argued. Sometimes, when they thought nobody was looking? They smiled at one another in a way Harry didn't quite understand.

"Oh."

Hermione looked at him.

Harry smiled. "Well. That's brilliant." He actually meant it.

She smiled back. "Thank you."

Harry leaned back. "Guess I'm running out of options."

Hermione considered, then her eyes sparkled.

"Why don't you ask Dracena?"

Harry's expression changed instantly. "Don't."

Hermione blinked. "What?"

"Don't start."

She frowned. "Harry..."

"I've already had enough of her today!"

Hermione stared.

Harry stood. "Honestly, Hermione. Of all people!" He grabbed his bag. "Forget it."

"Harry!"

He walked away. Hermione watched him go, then slowly closed her book. "Oh, dear." She had a feeling she'd missed something important.

The next morning, Harry was leaving breakfast when someone stepped into his path.

"Potter."

He stopped. Dracena stood before him. She looked unusually uncomfortable.

"Malfoy. I thought I told you..."

Harry tried to walk around her. She blocked him.

"Wait."

Harry sighed. "What?"

Dracena took a breath. "Look."

Harry waited.

She looked down, then back up. "I'm sorry."

Harry blinked. He tried to remember if Dracena Malfoy had ever apologized to him before. He couldn't recall any instances immediately. Harry looked at her again. She looked genuinely miserable.

"I wasn't trying to make fun of you."

He looked away. "Could've fooled me."

"I know."

Harry looked back.

She swallowed. "I was trying to..."

She stopped. Harry waited.

Dracena's cheeks warmed. "I was trying to help."

Harry sighed. "Dracena..."

"And I'm without a date too."

Harry frowned. "What?"

She lifted her chin. "I asked Cedric Diggory."

Harry stared. "He's going with Cho."

Dracena looked at him. "Yes. I know. He asked her after I asked him." she said, bitterly.

Harry blinked. "Oh."

Dracena looked away. For once, she had nothing clever to say.

Harry studied her. She'd asked Cedric Diggory. He'd turned her down, and then she'd found Harry, and offered to go with him. Perhaps she hadn't been joking. Perhaps...

Harry took a breath. "Look, Dracena..."

She turned. "Yes."

Harry blinked.

"What?" She said, slightly annoyed.

"Yes. I will."

She froze. Harry stared. Dracena stared back. Her face went scarlet. "I mean..."

Harry smiled slowly.

Dracena lifted her chin. "I'll show up with you."

Harry's smile widened.

"But you have to look presentable." She said, sternly.

Harry laughed.

Dracena scowled. "Don't laugh!"

"I'm not."

"You are!"

Harry grinned. "All right."

Dracena blinked. "All right?"

"Yeah." He smiled. "I'd like that."

Dracena felt her stomach flutter.

"Oh." Harry continued.

"And don't worry." She frowned.

"About what?"

"I'll take you shopping." Dracena stared, then she laughed. "Potter, you have absolutely no idea what you're getting yourself into."

Harry smiled. "Probably not."

Harry had never noticed the little boutique before. It was tucked between two much larger shops on a narrow street just off the main road through Hogsmeade. There was no sign, only a polished brass door and a small window displaying a single set of exquisite dress robes.

Harry stopped. "What's this place?"

Dracena smiled. "A shop."

Harry looked at her. "Yes, I gathered. Very helpful."

"You're welcome."

He examined the door. "Why doesn't it have a sign?"

Dracena looked faintly surprised. "Because they don't need one."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"They only admit people they know."

Harry stared. "How does anyone find them?"

Dracena smiled. "They don't."

Harry considered. "That sounds like a terrible way to run a business."

Dracena laughed. "Oh, Potter."

"What?"

"Some businesses don't need to LOOK for customers."

Harry stared. "Then why are they businesses?"

Dracena sighed. "Come along."

She opened the door. A little bell chimed. An impeccably dressed attendant appeared almost immediately.

"Miss Malfoy!" The man shouted theatrically, He positively sang her name, spreading his hands in delight.

Dracena smiled. "Good afternoon, Mr. Vale."

"Oh, my *dear* , the pleasure is entirely mine."

His eyes moved toward Harry. "And who." he asked, one eyebrow arching magnificently, "is this charming young gentleman?" His voice practically sang as he spoke.

Dracena lifted her chin. "Harry Potter."

The attendant's eyebrows rose. "Ah."

Harry sighed. *Here we go*.

Dracena continued. "He needs dress robes."

Mr. Vale clasped his hands together. His eyes moved up and down, examining Harry.

"Well, Mr. Potter. I believe we have our work cut out for us."

Dracena smiled. "Don't worry, Potter. We'll fix you up."

The shop was enormous inside. Much larger than it had appeared from the street. Rows of fine robes lined the walls. Mirrors floated in the air. Soft lights illuminated displays of fabric that shimmered and changed color as Harry walked past.

He stopped beside a rack. "How about these?"

Dracena looked, then recoiled. "Honestly, Potter."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"Those are last year's styles."

Harry examined them. "They look fine to me."

Dracena sighed. "That's the problem."

Harry grinned. "What's wrong with last year's styles?"

"Everything."

"They're clothes."

"Potter."

"What?"

"Do you want to look respectable?"

Harry considered. "Not particularly."

Dracena glared. Harry laughed. "All right, all right."

She examined several racks, then stopped at a particular one.

"Oh."

Harry watched her. She pulled out a set of dark dress robes. They were deep midnight blue, with subtle silver embroidery. Elegant without being ostentatious. She held them up against Harry, slightly tilting her head.

"Yes."

Harry looked down. "These?"

"These."

"They look expensive."

Dracena smiled. "They are."

Harry sighed. "Naturally."

She handed them to him. "Try them on."

Harry disappeared behind a dressing-room door. Mr. Vale followed to assist him. A moment later, Harry's ordinary robes came flying over the top of the door. Dracena caught them, and she stared, slowly smiling a wicked smile. She glanced toward the dressing room, and raised her wand.

"Revel..."

The attendant's head appeared over the partition. "Don't."

Dracena froze. Mr. Vale stared at her.

"Even."

Her cheeks warmed, and turned bright red.

"Try."

He raised an eyebrow. "The fitting rooms are warded, Miss Malfoy. Some of us believe a gentleman deserves a little privacy." he scolded with exaggerated severity.

Dracena went scarlet. "I wasn't..."

"Of course not." Mr. Vale grinned widely at her, and raised his eyebrows, looking back at where Harry was changing.

He disappeared. Then added from behind the door: "Pervert."

Dracena nearly dropped her wand. "I AM NOT!"

From inside, Harry called: "What?"

"NOTHING, POTTER!"

Harry paused. "Are you arguing with the shopkeeper?"

"NO!"

Harry laughed.

Dracena covered her face. *Oh, for Merlin's sake.*

Several minutes later, the door opened and Harry stepped out. Dracena turned, and forgot how to speak. The robes fit him perfectly. The midnight-blue fabric complemented his dark hair and green eyes. The silver embroidery caught the light without drawing attention away from him. He looked older. Taller. Handsome. Really, genuinely handsome.

Dracena stared.

Harry looked down. "Well?"

She said nothing.

Harry frowned. "Dracena?"

She blinked. "Oh. Wow."

Harry looked worried. "Are they bad?"

Dracena swallowed. "No."

Harry smiled. "No?"

She straightened, lifting her chin. "They'll do."

Harry laughed. "They'll do?"

"Yes."

She looked away. "Perfectly adequate."

Mr. Vale clapped his hands gently, grinning widely. "Excellent!" he said.

Harry examined himself in the mirror. "Well, I like them."

Dracena glanced back. He was smiling. That stupid smile. His green eyes shone. She swallowed. "Good."

Harry turned. "Thanks, Dracena." She looked at him.

For one moment she forgot to be difficult. "You're welcome." Then she remembered herself. "See you tonight, Potter." She hurried toward the door before he could notice how red her face had become.

Harry stood outside the entrance to the Slytherin common room. Even Ron had admitted how good his robes looked, although he'd complained bitterly about how much better Harry's looked than his own.

Harry felt ridiculous because he was waiting for Dracena Malfoy. As his date. Well. Sort of. She'd been very particular about the terminology. They were arriving together. Nothing more.

Harry had agreed, but he couldn't quite stop smiling. He knocked. The entrance opened, and Dracena stepped out.

Harry forgot how to breathe. She wore a magnificent gown of deep emerald green, embroidered with delicate silver patterns that shimmered when she moved. Her pale hair fell in soft waves around her bare shoulders, held back by a small silver ornament. Her eyes seemed impossibly bright. The dress was elegant. Beautiful.

Harry stared.

Dracena smiled. "Well?"

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Dracena's smile widened. "Pick your chin up off the floor, Potter. Honestly."

Harry blinked. "Sorry."

She laughed.

Harry swallowed. "You look amazing."

Dracena froze. For once, Dracena Malfoy had absolutely no idea what to say. "Oh."

Harry smiled. "Really."

Her cheeks warmed "Well." She cleared her throat. "You look rather presentable yourself."

Harry grinned. "High praise."

"Don't get used to it."

He offered his arm.

Dracena stared, smiled, and took it.

The Great Hall was magnificent. Enchanted snow drifted beneath the ceiling. Thousands of tiny lights floated in the air. The walls glittered with frost. Music filled the room. Students danced, laughing and talking.

Harry and Dracena entered, and everything in the room stopped. The musicians faltered for a moment, and the conversations nearest the doors fell silent.

Harry Potter and Dracena Malfoy. Together. Harry felt every eye turn toward them. His stomach tightened.

"Oh, brilliant." he muttered.

Dracena smiled. She was in heaven. Everyone was looking. Everyone was whispering. Everyone was wondering. She and Harry were the center of attention. She lifted her chin, and straightened her shoulders. She walked beside Harry as though they were royalty.

Harry leaned toward her. "Dracena."

"Hmm?"

"Everyone's staring."

"I know."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

She smiled. "Not in the slightest."

They reached the center of the room.

The music resumed. Conversations slowly returned.

Dracena looked around, then released Harry's arm.

"Well."

Harry turned. "Well?"

She smiled. "See you later, Potter."

Harry blinked. "What?"

She gestured toward the Slytherin tables. "My friends."

Harry stared. "But I thought..."

Dracena smiled sweetly. "I said we'd show up together."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it.

She laughed. "Enjoy yourself." Then she walked away.

Harry stood motionless while he watched her go.

He looked toward the ceiling. "Of course." He sighed. "Of course."

Dracena was having a dreadful time. This was particularly irritating because she looked magnificent. Everyone had said so. Pansy had admired her dress. Several boys had complimented her. Even a few Gryffindor girls had stopped to ask where she'd bought it. Everything was going exactly as she'd expected.

Except she was bored. Terribly bored. Pansy was discussing someone else's dress. One of the other girls was explaining why a certain Ravenclaw boy was unsuitable. Another was gossiping about a couple who had been caught kissing behind the greenhouses.

Dracena stared across the room. Harry was sitting with Ron and Hermione. Ron looked extremely uncomfortable in his dress robes. Hermione looked beautiful. The two of them were behaving very strangely. Ron kept offering Hermione things. Food. Drinks. His chair. At one point he tried to pull her chair out for her after she'd already sat down. Hermione laughed. Ron went red. Hermione reached across the table and straightened his collar. Ron looked as though he'd been struck by lightning.

Dracena smiled faintly. *Oh, those two.*

Harry, meanwhile, looked thoroughly abandoned. He said something. Neither Ron nor Hermione heard him. He tried again. Hermione was laughing at something Ron had said. Harry sighed, then stood and walked away. Dracena watched him walk toward the edge of the room. He found an empty chair and sat down.

He stared at the dancers. Dracena's smile faded. She looked back at her friends. Pansy was still talking. "...and honestly, the color was dreadful."

Dracena sighed. She'd spent the entire evening waiting for something interesting to happen. The most interesting person in the room was sitting alone. She looked at her glass. The punch was rather good. She'd already had several. Perhaps another wouldn't hurt.

Harry had decided that the Yule Ball was overrated. The decorations were lovely. The food was excellent. The music was pleasant. Ron and Hermione were behaving like two people who had suddenly discovered that the other existed in an entirely new and bewildering way.

Harry was happy for them, but it made him feel rather unnecessary. He watched them dancing. Badly. Ron stepped on Hermione's foot. She

laughed, and he apologized. Then she stepped on his. They both laughed. Harry smiled.

Good for them. Then he sighed. The musicians announced the final dance. Harry considered leaving.

"Potter!"

He looked up. Dracena Malfoy stood before him. She was smiling broadly.

Harry blinked. "Dracena?"

She held out her hand. "Come on!"

Harry frowned. "Where?"

She laughed. "To dance, you idiot!"

Harry stared. "With you?"

"No, Potter. With the dementors!"

Harry smiled. "All Right."

Harry noticed Dracena was swaying slightly. Her cheeks were flushed. Her eyes were unusually bright.

And she smelled...

Harry frowned. "Dracena?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you all right?"

She beamed. "I'm fiiiiine, Potter!"

Harry leaned closer and sniffed. "Blimey."

Dracena giggled.

Harry stared. "You smell like a brewery."

She looked offended. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Have you been drinking?"

Dracena waved a hand. "Punch."

Harry frowned. "Punch?"

"Delicious punch." She smiled. "Lots of punch."

Harry stared.

Dracena grabbed his hand. "COME ON!"

"Dracena..."

"LET'S DANCE!" She pulled him toward the floor.

Harry stumbled as he tugged his arm.

Harry had never been particularly good at dancing. Fortunately, Dracena had. Unfortunately, Dracena was currently having some difficulty remembering which direction was forward.

"Potter."

"Yes?"

"Your hand."

Harry looked down. "What about it?"

"Here." She took his hand and placed it against her waist.

Harry went red. "Oh."

Dracena smiled. "Honestly. Have you never danced before?"

"Not really."

"Well, you're learning tonight!" She placed her other hand on his shoulder.

"Now. Follow me." Harry tried, and stepped on her foot.

Dracena laughed. "Potter!"

"Sorry!"

"Other foot!"

"Right!"

"No, your *other* other foot!"

Harry laughed. Dracena laughed too. They turned. Slowly and awkwardly. Eventually, Harry began to catch on. He found the rhythm and adjusted his steps.

Dracena smiled. "There."

Harry grinned. "Not so difficult."

"Of course not."

They moved together. The music was slow and gentle. Harry relaxed.

Dracena leaned a little closer. Her head was beginning to feel pleasantly light. The room seemed warmer.

Harry Potter was holding her. That was nice. Very nice.

She smiled. "You're not terrible, Potter."

Harry laughed. "High praise."

"Don't get used to it."

He smiled.

Dracena rested her head briefly against his shoulder.

Harry blinked.

They continued dancing.

"Harry?" Dracena said.

Harry looked at her

"Yeah?"

"I'm lonely."

Harry frowned. "What?"

Dracena looked at him, her smile fading

"I'm lonely."

Harry stared. "Dracena..."

She shook her head. "Everyone thinks I'm so lucky."

Harry considered. "Well..."

Dracena looked at him. "Don't."

Harry smiled faintly. "All right."

She continued. "I have everything."

Harry nodded. "Pretty much."

"Father gives me anything I want."

"I noticed."

She sighed. "And everyone wants to be my friend."

Harry looked at her.

Dracena's eyes were shining. "But nobody..." She stopped, and Harry waited.

"Nobody **knows** me."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

Dracena looked away. "They know Dracena **Malfoy** ." She said, emphasis on her last name.

Harry said nothing.

"They know Father's daughter." She swallowed. "They know what I'm supposed to be. They don't know **me** ."

Harry watched her.

"But sometimes..." She looked down. "Sometimes I don't know if that's who I am."

Harry felt something tighten in his chest. He tried to remember the last time he heard her talk like this. Was it back when the hippogriff had terrified her?

"Dracena."

She looked up.

Harry smiled gently. "I'm glad I've got my friends."

Dracena blinked. "What?"

"Ron. Hermione. Neville." He looked across the room.

Ron and Hermione were still dancing. Quite Badly.

Harry smiled. "They know me."

Dracena watched him.

"They don't care about the famous Harry Potter." He laughed. "Well, Ron did at first."

Dracena smiled faintly.

"But now?" Harry shook his head. "To them? I'm just Harry." He looked at her. "And that's brilliant."

Dracena stared. Her eyes filled. "I don't have anyone like that, Harry."

Harry stopped smiling. "Not Pansy?"

Dracena shook her head.

"Nobody in Slytherin?"

She looked down. "They all expect me to be something."

Harry waited.

"And I don't know if I'm that." Her voice cracked. "I never got a chance to really find out."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he simply held her a little closer.

Dracena closed her eyes. For a moment, she let herself enjoy it. The warmth. The music. Harry's hand against her back.

It reminded her of something, a dream. She was flying over beautiful countryside, her arms around his waist. Her cheek against his back. She smiled sadly. "You're nice, Harry."

Harry blinked. "What?"

Dracena looked up. "Sometimes."

Harry laughed softly. "Thanks. I think."

She smiled. "Don't tell anyone." She said, in an exaggerated whisper.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

They continued dancing.

"You know, I've always been a bit jealous of you." Harry said, idly.

Dracena blinked. "Me?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

She laughed. "Potter, you have no idea how ridiculous that sounds."

Harry smiled. "Probably."

Dracena looked at him. "Why?"

"Your father."

Her expression changed. "Father?"

Harry nodded. "You talk about him all the time."

Dracena smiled. "He's wonderful."

Harry looked down. "I never knew mine."

Dracena's smile faded.

Harry continued. "My parents, I mean."

She watched him. They separated for a moment. Harry reached inside his robes. He carried a small pouch beneath them. From it, he carefully withdrew an old photograph, and held it out. "This is all I've got of them."

Dracena stared. The photograph showed a young man and woman. It was a tattered, muggle style photograph. James and Lily Potter. They were smiling. Happy.

Dracena took the photograph. Very carefully, she looked at it. Really looked. The woman had Harry's eyes. The man had his hair. She stared for a long time. Something about how his mother looked at his father caught her attention.

Harry smiled sadly. "That's my mum."

Dracena said nothing.

"And my dad."

She looked up. Harry was watching her. For a moment, she felt something enormous and complicated. Harry had trusted her with this. Not just shown her. Trusted her. She looked back at the photograph. Her thoughts became pleasantly tangled.

James and Lily Potter smiled up at her, looking impossibly young. His mother had his eyes. His father had that same untidy hair.

Dracena swallowed. She'd never seen Harry look quite so vulnerable. She'd never FELT so vulnerable. She'd spent the evening telling him things she'd never told anyone. Things about Father. About the people she knew. About how lonely she sometimes felt.

And Harry had listened. He hadn't laughed. Hadn't made one of his infuriating remarks. Hadn't even called her a snob. He'd simply listened.

Now he'd shown her this.

Dracena looked up at him. Harry smiled a small, sad smile.

Suddenly she desperately wanted him to smile properly, the way he did when they were arguing. The way he did when they were flying against each other, laughing and shouting insults across the Quidditch pitch. That was much easier. Much more comfortable. She could do that.

Him smiling at her like this felt way too different. She didn't know how to handle it.

She looked up. "Harry."

He blinked. "Yeah?"

"You shouldn't keep things like this just lying around." she smiled widely.

Harry frowned. "What?"

Dracena lifted the photograph. "This."

Harry reached for it. "Well, I keep it in my pouch..."

"That tatty little thing?"

Harry looked down. "What's wrong with my pouch?"

Dracena smiled. "Oh, nothing. If you're a house-elf."

Harry laughed. "There she is."

Dracena beamed. There. That was better. She was much more comfortable with this.

"Honestly, Potter, I don't know how you manage."

Harry grinned. "Manage what?"

"Anything."

"Very funny."

"Thank you."

She looked at the photograph again, holding it just beyond his reach.

"I think I'll keep this."

Harry blinked.

"What?"

Dracena smiled mischievously.

She smiled. "I'm keeping it."

Harry blinked. "What?" The smile on his face disappeared immediately.

"I'm con..." She frowned. "Consif..."

Harry stared.

Dracena tried again. "Confis... cating." She smiled triumphantly. "Confiscating."

Harry's expression changed. "Dracena."

She nodded. "Yes?"

"Give it back." Harry said, flatly.

She shook her head. "No."

Harry stared. "That's my parents."

Dracena smiled. "I know."

"Then give it back."

She tucked the photograph against her chest. "For chafe..." She frowned. "Safe."

Harry's jaw tightened. "Dracena."

"Safekeeping." She smiled. "There."

Harry stared. For a moment he couldn't believe what was happening. They'd been having such a nice evening. They'd talked. Really talked. He'd seen a side of Dracena he'd never seen before. He'd shown her the

only photograph he had of his parents. And now? Now she was playing another one of her stupid games.

"Give it back."

Dracena shook her head. "Oh, Harry. Honestly."

Harry's face hardened. "Dracena, I'm serious."

"So am I." She looked at the photograph. "Very serious."

Harry stared. Then he said quietly: "...and I was having such a nice time."

Dracena looked up. Her face brightened. "I'M STILL HAVING A GREAT TIME!"

Harry recoiled. Several nearby dancers glanced toward them.

Dracena laughed.

Harry's expression closed. Of course. Of course she'd do this. He should have known.

"Fine." He said, flatly.

Dracena blinked, confused. "What?"

"Whatever." Harry stepped back.

She frowned. "Harry?"

He looked at her. "Have a good night, Malfoy."

Dracena's smile faltered. "Harry?"

He turned and walked away without looking back.

Dracena stood in the middle of the dance floor, holding the photograph and watched him go.

For a moment she didn't understand, then something twisted in her chest. Oh. She looked down. The photograph was still in her hand. James and Lily Potter smiled up at her.

Dracena swallowed.

"WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS?" Professor McGonagall's voice cut through the Great Hall. Several students froze. McGonagall stood beside the refreshments table, holding a glass of punch. Her expression was thunderous. "WHO HAS BEEN ADDING FIREWHISKY TO THE PUNCH?"

A group of older students abruptly discovered urgent business elsewhere.

McGonagall glared. "COME BACK HERE!"

Dracena blinked. Firewhisky? She looked at her empty glass, then at the punch bowl. Then at the photograph in her hand. "Oh." Her stomach lurched. She belched, loudly.

A nearby Ravenclaw stared.

Dracena covered her mouth. "Oh, Merlin." She looked toward the doors.

Harry was gone. She looked at the photograph again.

What have I done? The room seemed to tilt. Dracena swallowed.

She suddenly felt terribly sick. She hurried toward the exit.

Dracena woke with a headache. A dreadful headache. Her mouth was dry. Her stomach felt peculiar, and the world seemed unnecessarily bright.

She groaned. "Oh, Merlin." She was in her bed, still wearing part of her dress. Someone had helped her out of her shoes. She vaguely remembered stumbling into the dormitory. Pansy laughing at her. Someone telling her to drink water.

Dracena sat up. Her head throbbed, as she looked around. The other girls were still awake, sitting together and gossiping about the night.

Dracena looked down. Something lay beside her pillow. A photograph. James and Lily Potter. She stared. Then she remembered everything.

Harry smiling. Harry dancing with her. Harry holding her. Harry telling her about his parents. Harry trusting her.

And then...

I'm confiscating this.

Dracena closed her eyes. "Oh, no." She remembered his face. The anger. The disappointment.

"*And I was having such a nice time*."

Her eyes filled. She'd ruined it. She'd ruined everything.

Again.

She picked up the photograph, holding it carefully, pressing it against her chest.

"Idiot." she whispered.

Pansy looked over. "Dracena?"

Dracena stood.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

Pansy frowned. "Are you all right?"

Dracena nodded too quickly. "Fine."

She hurried toward the door.

"Dracena..."

"I'm fine!"

She left before anyone could see her crying.

The girls' bathroom was empty.

Well, almost empty. Dracena pushed open the door. The room was cold and quiet.

Moonlight spilled through the windows. She walked toward the sinks, staring as her reflection stared back at her.

Her pale hair was tangled. Her eyes red and bloodshot. Her makeup was smudged. The magnificent dress Mother had commissioned was wrinkled.

Dracena looked dreadful. She laughed bitterly. "So much for the finest dress in the castle."

A toilet flushed. Dracena jumped. A pale, ghostly figure rose slowly from one of the stalls.

"Who's there?" Dracena wiped her eyes.

"Nobody." an ethereal voice responded. Moaning Myrtle floated closer. "Oh."

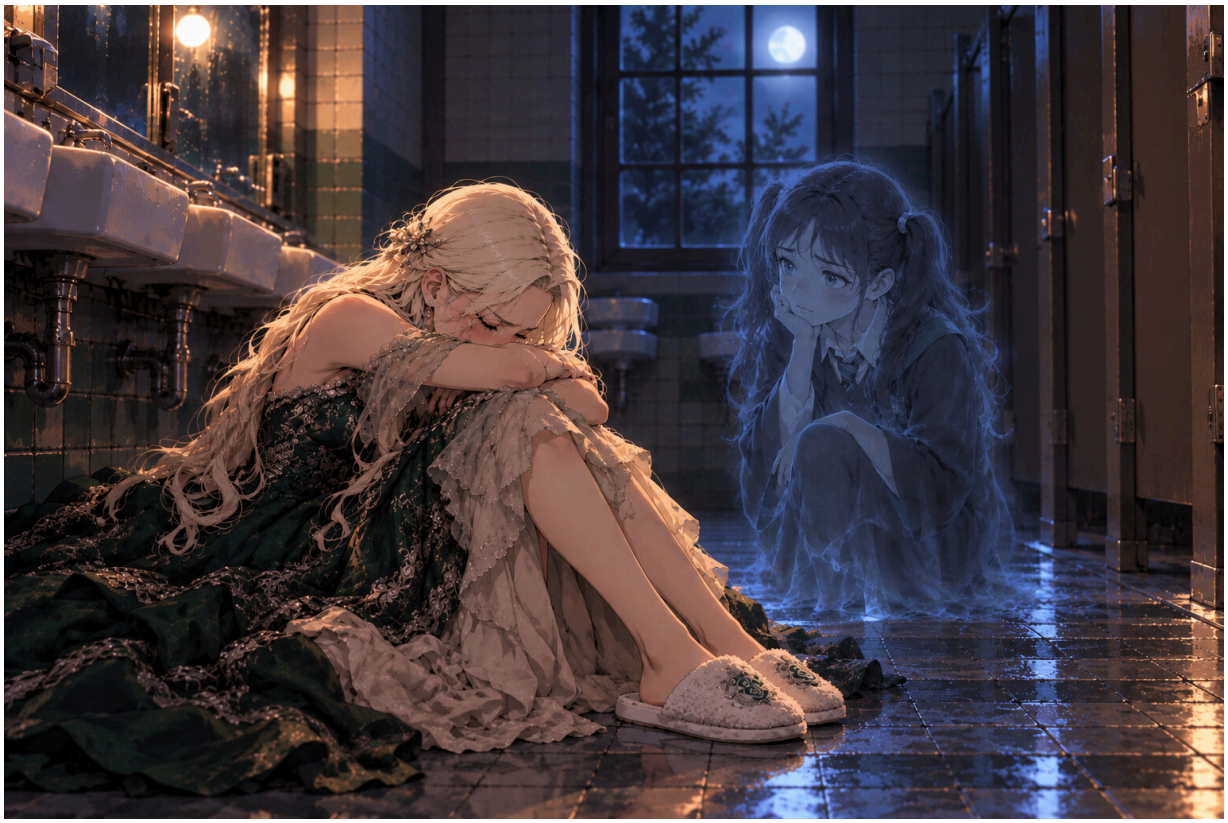
She looked delighted. "Someone's crying."

Dracena glared. "Go away."

Myrtle drifted nearer. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

The Bathroom



Harry had several excellent reasons for being inside the Slytherin girls' washroom after midnight. None of them would have sounded nearly as good if he got caught.

Dracena Malfoy had stolen his photograph. Technically, according to her, she had not stolen it; she had "confiscated" it. It was an old Muggle photograph of his parents, taken before he was born. His mother was laughing at something outside the frame while his father looked at her instead of the camera. Malfoy had stared at it for longer than Potter expected. Then she'd taken it.

That had been several hours ago at the party. Which explained why Harry was now creeping through the girls' washroom near the Slytherin dorms, wearing his invisibility cloak. He knew Malfoy secretly kept a little silver case in the cabinet beside the sinks. He knew this because she had once complained at considerable length that someone had moved it.

Harry had called her insane.

Dracena had informed him that Gryffindors probably stored their belongings in piles on the floor like livestock.

Harry had asked how she knew what his dormitory looked like. She had gone scarlet.

Harry smiled at the memory.

He didn't know what she kept in that case, but he remembered her reaction when it went missing. He could teach her a lesson, too.

He heard someone crying. Harry stopped smiling. This wasn't ordinary crying, it was what Hermione once called "Ugly crying." Someone was absolutely sobbing. Potter froze. The sound came from around the corner.

He should leave. Every sensible part of him knew this immediately. He was invisible, after midnight, inside a girls' washroom where he absolutely did not belong. Leaving was the only remotely decent option.

"Oh, stop wailing. You're making me depressed. More than usual, I mean."

Potter recognized the voice. Moaning Myrtle. The crying stopped for several seconds, and another voice answered. "Shut up, Myrtle."

Potter's heart stopped. It was Dracena Malfoy. He should absolutely leave. Immediately, if not sooner. He took one silent step backward to find the door, trying as hard as he could to insure the invisibility cloak didn't move and expose him.

"I still don't see what the problem is." Myrtle said.

"You wouldn't."

"Of course I would. I know all about boys."

"You died when you were fourteen." Malfoy said, matter of factly.

"Exactly. I've had decades to study them."

Despite himself, Harry almost laughed. Dracena did not.

"From the Bathroom? Please. You don't understand."

"Then explain it again." Myrtle said

"I've explained it three times."

"And you've cried four."

"Thank you, Myrtle."

"You're welcome."

Pregnant silence. Harry was afraid to move, in case his footsteps revealed him.

Harry knew he should leave, but was also terrified of accidentally making a noise that could reveal him, so he remained exactly where he was.

Malfoy sniffed. "It's Potter."

Harry's stomach dropped.

"What about him?"

Harry heard a lonely drip from one of the washbasins. It echoed impossibly loud.

Malfoy said something so quietly Potter almost didn't hear it.

"I think I'm in love with him."

Harry forgot how legs worked.

Myrtle made a delighted squeal. "Oh, I KNEW IT!"

"Shhh!"

"You LOVE Harry Potter!" Myrtle said, squealing in delight.

"Myrtle!"

"Malfoy and Potter, sitting in a..."

"If you finish that, I swear I will find out whether ghosts can be exorcised."

Myrtle giggled. Harry leaned against the stone wall, desperately trying to remember how to walk. His heart was pounding so loudly he became

genuinely concerned they might hear it.

"You've kissed him, haven't you?"

"No!" Malfoy screamed. Harry's ears rang from the shout.

"You want to."

Malfoy looked directly at Myrtle, and said nothing.

"Oooooh." Myrtle squealed, delightfully.

"Myrtle."

"You do!"

"Of course I do!" The words exploded out of her. When she spoke again, her voice cracked. "That's the problem."

Harry's smile disappeared.

"I don't understand." Myrtle said.

"No. You wouldn't."

"You keep saying that."

"You don't understand because your parents were Muggles!" Malfoy snapped.

Myrtle went very still. The wounded look on her face was clear. Dracena saw it.

"Oh, for... No. Myrtle, that isn't what I meant. I said it badly."

Myrtle folded her arms.

"Very badly." Dracena said.

"Yes. Fine. Very badly." Myrtle said.

Dracena took a breath. "What I mean is... your parents didn't know about any of this. About our world. Our history. Our customs. You couldn't grow up with something they couldn't teach you."

Myrtle's expression softened slightly, although her arms remained folded.

"That doesn't mean there was anything wrong with them." Dracena added quickly. "Or with you. I don't mean that."

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean my mother sang wizarding songs to me when I was little. My grandfather taught me our family history before I could properly read. I knew the names of the old families before I knew half the names of the countries in Europe."

Dracena sniffed.

"I grew up hearing stories about Hogwarts. About Slytherin. About people whose portraits are hanging in my house. There are things we do at Christmas because Malfoys have done them for hundreds of years. There are things Mother owns that belonged to her grandmother, and someday they'll belong to me."

Her voice became quieter. "This isn't some club I joined, Myrtle."

Myrtle unfolded her arms.

"It's where I came from." Dracena said, silently.

"Oh."

"That's what I mean when I say you wouldn't understand. Not because you're..." Dracena waved her hand helplessly. "Not because your blood is wrong or any of that."

She grimaced and sighed, loudly

"I'm trying. Myrtle. I really am. It's hard to change... something you thought your entire life."

"I know."

"And Potter makes it sound so easy. Just decide this tradition is stupid. Decide that one is unfair. Throw this away. Stop believing that. And sometimes he's right, which is the absolutely intolerable part."

Dracena sniffed again.

"People like Potter think I'm just supposed to decide Father is wrong about everything. That my family is wrong. That everything I've been taught since I could speak is stupid and evil and I'm supposed to throw it away because Potter has those beautiful eyes and stupid hair and smiles at me like an idiot."

Harry instinctively touched his hair.

"And his hair is stupid." Dracena added bitterly.

Harry frowned.

Myrtle said, "I like his hair."

"Nobody asked you."

"I think it's romantic." She said, dreamily.

"It's ridiculous."

"You touch it."

"I do not." Malfoy said, stubbornly.

"I've seen you."

"When?"

"I float through walls, Dracena"

"That's horrifying."

Myrtle giggled again.

"My family matters to me." Dracena continued. Something about her voice made Potter straighten.

"My name matters to me. Our history matters. My grandfather used to tell me stories about our family when I was little. About things we've accomplished. Things we've survived. Traditions that are hundreds of

years old." Her voice trembled. "Potter hears 'tradition' and thinks it means 'I hate Granger.'"

Harry looked at the floor.

"Do you?"

"No!" The answer came immediately.

"I don't know."

Potter frowned.

"I don't hate her. She's irritating and smug and correct about things far too often, but I don't hate her."

"So you're friends now? Great!."

"Shut up."

"Do you think you're better than her?"

Another long silence.

"Father would say yes."

Harry stopped breathing.

"But me? I don't know anymore."

Dracena's voice had become small.

"I don't know what I think anymore. Do you have any idea how scary that is, Myrtle?"

Myrtle was silent now.

"I know things Potter doesn't." Malfoy continued. "He acts as though everything old is just some stupid rule somebody invented because they were bored. He doesn't understand what it's like to grow up in a magical family. He doesn't know the stories. He doesn't know the customs. He doesn't know why some things matter."

Harry felt an unexpected sting, because she was right. He'd entered their world as a stranger and sometimes treated the parts he disliked as though their age alone made them ridiculous.

Dracena sniffed.

"But then he asks me why. And I hate him for it." Myrtle said nothing. Potter's heart sank. "Because sometimes I don't have an answer."

His heart rose again.

"Father says something, and I've always believed it because Father said it. Then Potter looks at me with those stupid beautiful eyes and asks, 'Why?'"

A tiny laugh escaped her through the tears. "And sometimes I want to hex him."

"Sometimes?"

"Most of the time."

"Ah."

"And sometimes I want to kiss him until he shuts up."

Harry's entire face turned bright red, and suddenly felt incredibly hot.

Myrtle sighed dreamily. "That's much more romantic."

"It is NOT romantic!"

"Sounds romantic."

"It's horrible!"

Dracena started crying again, and suddenly Potter didn't find any of this funny.

"I don't want to lose my family." Dracena sniffled. "I don't want Father to look at me differently. I don't want Mother ashamed of me. I don't want to become some cautionary story they whisper about at Christmas."

Her breathing skipped.

"And I don't want to lose myself. I like being a Malfoy." She sounded apologetic, lost.

"I like our stupid enormous house. I like Mother's ridiculous formal dinners. I like knowing which fork to use. I like the old songs. I like hearing Grandfather's stories. I like our Christmas traditions. I like knowing my family has been part of this world for hundreds of years. I like knowing how we fit into the world."

Her voice broke. "Why does everyone act as though being friendly with Potter means I'm supposed to hate all of that?"

Harry's chest hurt.

Myrtle, surprisingly, didn't answer immediately. "Does Potter ask you to?"

Dracena was silent.

"Has he ever asked you to?" Myrtle repeated

"No." Dracena whispered.

"Then perhaps you're arguing with a ghost."

Dracena sniffed. "You're funny."

"What I mean is, perhaps you're arguing with something that isn't real. You think you know what's going to happen, but you really don't."

"What?"

"You keep telling me what Potter thinks you have to become." Myrtle said. Her voice had lost its usual theatrical whine. "But have you ever asked him?"

The washbasin faucet dripped somewhere in the background again

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because he'll say something noble and infuriating."

Harry smiled under the cloak.

"And then I'll love him more."

Harry's smile disappeared again. He stood absolutely motionless, afraid to breathe.

Dracena began crying again, exhausted little sobs "I've tried not talking to him. "That lasted two days."

"Thirty-seven hours." Myrtle said.

"I remember. "I tried being horrible to him."

"You gave him a Christmas present."

"It was a book."

"You wrapped it."

"Mother says presentation matters."

"You put a little silver ribbon on it."

"I LIKE RIBBONS, MYRTLE." Dracena shouted.

Potter covered his mouth. Myrtle was laughing, too. Dracena was trying not to.

"I stole his photograph." she whispered, shame dripping from her voice.

Harry's eyebrows rose.

"Why?" asked Myrtle.

"I wanted to look at it." Harry's anger evaporated so quickly it embarrassed him.

"It's his parents."

"I know."

"They're dead."

"I know, Myrtle."

"That's rather cruel."

"I KNOW." Dracena sounded miserable.

"I was going to give it back tomorrow."

"Why did you take it?"

Dracena was quiet. "Because I wanted to understand him."

Potter's throat tightened.

"He looks like his father. Everyone says so." Another sniff. "But he looks at people like his mother."

Harry's hand dropped from his mouth.

"I noticed it in the photograph."

Dracena's voice softened.

"She looks at his father the way Potter looks at people when he thinks nobody's watching."

"How?"

"Like they're important."

Harry stared into nothing.

"He does it with Weasley. Granger. Longbottom. I never would have thought of them as important until Harry did." She paused for a moment.

"Sometimes he looks at me that way, too." Dracena said, quietly.

Myrtle replied, just as quietly, "Maybe you are."

Dracena broke. Harry heard her sob into her sleeves. "I don't know what to do."

For several moments there was nothing but crying.

"You could tell him." Myrtle said.

"Absolutely not!"

"Why?"

"Because I'd rather die."

"I did that. I don't recommend it."

Despite everything, Dracena laughed. A broken, watery little laugh.

Harry looked toward the exit. He could leave. Perhaps he should. He needed to. This wasn't meant for him. He'd heard something Dracena Malfoy would rather throw herself into the Black Lake than let him hear.

"What if he loves you too?" Myrtle said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Dracena became completely silent.

"He doesn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm horrible to him."

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"And because he thinks I'm a snob."

"You are a snob."

"Myrtle!"

"You are."

"SIGH. Fine."

"And because you insult his friends."

"I've been trying not to."

Harry blinked. He thought back. He couldn't remember the last time Dracena called Ron "poor." It must have been several weeks. Similarly he

couldn't remember the last time she called Hermione "the Muggle-born mudblood." Harry never would have noticed.

"And because." Dracena continued, "even if he does..." She couldn't finish.

Myrtle waited.

Dracena finally whispered: "What if loving each other isn't enough? We're so different!"

Harry felt that one, because for the first time that night, she had asked the question he'd been avoiding himself. Attraction was easy. Flirting was easy. Arguing in corridors and pretending not to enjoy it was easy. Even kissing her (something he had spent an increasingly unreasonable amount of time imagining) would be easy. Everything afterward was difficult. It wasn't like the movies.

Their friends.
Their families.
Their houses.
Their ideas about the world.
The parts of Dracena Malfoy that Harry would have actually wanted her to change.
The parts he slowly realized that she shouldn't have to.
And, perhaps most frighteningly, the possibility that she might ask the same of him.

"Maybe it isn't." Myrtle said.

Dracena sniffed. "You're terrible at this."

"I've never had a boyfriend." Myrtle said, quietly.

"Despite studying boys from the bathroom? Clearly."

"But maybe..."

Myrtle hesitated. "Maybe loving somebody doesn't solve the problem."

Dracena was silent. Myrtle continued, "Maybe it just makes the problem worth solving."

Harry stared at the stone floor.

For once in her afterlife, Moaning Myrtle had said something astonishingly wise.

"That's disgustingly sentimental." Dracena said.

"I thought it was rather good."

"It was awful."

"You're going to remember it forever."

"I hate you."

"No, you don't."

"No." Malfoy sighed. "I don't."

Harry quietly backed toward the door. He had forgotten entirely about the photograph. He didn't want it back anymore. He had reached the doorway.

"Myrtle?"

"Yes?"

"If you ever tell Potter any of this, I'll deny everything."

"Of course."

"And if he somehow happened to be standing under a cloak of invisibility, in the washroom, listening to us?" Myrtle looked right at him. Harry froze.

There was a terrible silence. Dracena stopped breathing. Harry stopped breathing. Then Myrtle shrieked with laughter. "I'm joking!"

"Myrtle!"

Dracena threw something. It passed directly through the ghost and shattered against the wall.

Harry slipped through the doorway before his heart could explode. He made it halfway down the corridor before his head felt like it would shatter. Slowly, Harry reached beneath the cloak and touched his crooked tie. For

months, he realized he'd been trying to decide whether Dracena was someone he could love. Despite his anger, earlier. Maybe his anger came from the fact he knew the same things, and refused to face them. He had never seriously considered the other question. He suddenly realized how brave Dracena was for admitting it to Myrtle.

Could he love Dracena without requiring her to stop being Malfoy?

Potter looked back toward the washroom.

"Oh, no." he whispered. He realized exactly what his thoughts meant. This was much worse than he'd thought. He was in love with her, too.

The Apology



Hermione knew something was wrong when Dracena Malfoy asked if she could sit down. Dracena usually did not ask permission to sit down. She sat, and somehow the furniture understood that was how it was going to be.

Hermione lowered her book. "What do you want?"

Dracena remained standing. "I want to talk to you."

"That sounds fun."

Dracena sighed.

"Usually when you want to talk to me, you begin by explaining something I already know." Hermione said, coldly.

Dracena's mouth tightened. Hermione waited for the inevitable retort, but it never came. Instead Dracena pulled out the chair opposite her and sat. Properly, of course. Dracena could sit properly during an earthquake.

"I owe you an apology."

Hermione blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"I said I owe you an apology."

"No, I heard you. I just thought perhaps I'd suffered a head injury."

Dracena's eyes narrowed. "Granger..."

"There she is." Hermione said, sharply.

"I am trying."

Hermione closed her book, and looked at Dracena. "All right."

Dracena placed both hands in her lap. For several seconds she said nothing. Hermione realized that this wasn't just difficult for Dracena in the ordinary sense. It was agonizing.

"I've said things about you." Dracena began.

"Yes."

"And about your family."

"Yes."

"And Muggles."

"Yes."

"You needn't make an inventory."

"You brought it up."

Dracena inhaled through her nose.

"Yes. Fine." She stared at her hands. "I was wrong."

Hermione said nothing.

"Not about everything."

Hermione's eyebrow rose.

Dracena winced. "That came out badly."

"Remarkably."

"I mean I'm not repudiating everything I've ever believed simply because..."

"Because of Harry?"

Dracena's head snapped up.

"This has nothing to do with Potter."

"Of course."

"It doesn't."

"Dracena."

The use of her first name stopped her. Hermione rarely used it.

Dracena looked away. "It isn't **only** because of Potter."

That, Hermione thought, was probably as much honesty as she was going to get. "All right."

Dracena took another breath. "I've been thinking about things."

"Ooh, that's dangerous."

"Would you please stop doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Making this harder."

Hermione saw something unexpectedly vulnerable in her expression. She softened. "Sorry."

Dracena nodded.

"I realized I don't actually know very much about Muggles."

Hermione nearly laughed.

Dracena glared at her. "I said I was sorry."

This was almost as hard for Hermione as it was for Dracena. She would take that to the grave, though.

"I know the important things, obviously."

Hermione's smile vanished. "The important things." she repeated, coldly.

Dracena apparently didn't notice.

"Some history. Muggle governments. Their relationship with wizarding society. Obviously Muggles don't have magic, so technologically they're rather..."

Dracena stopped. Hermione stared at her.

"Rather what?" she repeated, sharply.

Dracena knew she'd stepped into something, but didn't know what. She continued, knowing she was already in trouble.

"Limited."

Hermione slowly put her book on the table.

"Limited."

"I don't mean stupid."

"Oh, well thank you. How generous."

"I mean there are things Muggles simply can't do."

"You mean, like Magic."

"Exactly."

"And therefore we're backward."

"I didn't say backward!"

"You were about to."

"I said limited."

"Dracena, how did you get to France last summer?"

The change of subject bewildered her.

"What?"

"France. Your family got there somehow. How did you travel there?"

"Portkey."

"How long did it take?"

"I don't know. Several seconds."

"Fine. How would a Muggle get there?"

Dracena shrugged. "A ship?"

Hermione stared at her.

"A ship?"

Dracena's uncertainty increased.

"Yes?"

"Dracena, Muggles routinely fly across oceans."

Silence.

Dracena smiled. It was a tiny, condescending smile. Hermione recognized it immediately.

"No, they don't."

"Yes, they do."

"Without magic?" Dracena said, skeptically.

"Yes."

Dracena looked almost offended by the proposition.

"How?"

"Airplanes."

"What is an airplane?"

Hermione stared at her. Dracena stared back. Suddenly Hermione understood the scale of the problem.

"You genuinely don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

Hermione leaned forward.

"We build machines that fly."

Dracena frowned.

"Like balloons? I've seen..."

"No. Hundreds of people at once. Hundreds of miles an hour. Miles above the ground."

Dracena's expression went flat..

"No. I don't..."

"Yes."

"Without magic?"

"Without magic."

"How?"

"Engines. Aerodynamics. Lift. It's hard to explain. It's almost its own type of magic."

Dracena stared. "Muggle magic?"

"Yes." Hermione said. "It's called 'science.'"

Dracena was silent. Hermione could actually see her trying to fit this information into her understanding of reality.

"How many?"

"How many what? Airplanes?"

"Yes."

"Thousands in the air every day."

Dracena stared at her.

"Thousands?"

"Yes."

"At the same time?"

"Yes."

"How do they not crash into one another?"

Hermione smiled despite herself. "We muggles are quite clever."

Dracena looked down. The remark had landed harder than Hermione intended.

"I didn't mean..." Hermione started.

Dracena swallowed.

She felt suddenly guilty. Dracena stared at the table. "What else?"

"What?"

"What else can Muggles do that I don't know about?"

Hermione considered her. "Quite a lot."

"Such as?"

"Computers."

"I've heard of those."

"What do you think they do?"

"Accounting."

Hermione laughed.

Dracena went pink.

"Some of them do a lot more."

"What else?"

Hermione thought about it.

"We've been to the Moon."

Dracena blinked. "What?"

"The Moon."

"Yes, I heard you."

"Muggles have walked on it."

Dracena stared at her.

Hermione watched disbelief become suspicion, then astonishment.

"You're lying."

"No."

"People have stood on the Moon."

"Yes."

"When?"

"1969. Before we were born."

"That's absurd."

"It happened."

"How did they breathe?"

"They brought air with them."

"How did they get there?"

"Rockets."

"What is a..." Dracena stopped herself. She looked exhausted. "Never mind. Continue."

Hermione almost smiled. "Nuclear power."

Dracena's brow furrowed.

"We learned how to release energy stored inside atoms."

Dracena's expression became very still.

"Inside matter?"

"Yes."

"How much energy?"

Hermione hesitated. "Enough that explaining the other thing we did with it probably isn't going to improve your opinion of us."

Dracena considered that. "War?"

"War."

"I think I heard about that. Japan."

For the first time, they both smiled. It vanished quickly.

Dracena looked toward the window.

"I didn't know."

"No."

"I thought..." She stopped.

Hermione waited.

"I thought Muggles were still using candles. Like we do. Only without magic."

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"You thought what?"

"Well, not candles exclusively."

"Oh, splendid."

"Granger..."

"Did you think my parents churned butter before sending me to Hogwarts?"

"No!"

"Perhaps we gathered berries in the forest?"

"I said I didn't know!"

Dracena stood. Hermione immediately regretted her outburst. Dracena's face turned red. "I'm trying to apologize to you!"

"You're doing an astonishing job."

"I KNOW!"

Her voice cracked.

Hermione stopped.

"I know." Dracena said, softly. "I don't know how to do this." Dracenia looked horrified. Her voice was suddenly tiny. "I know I'm doing this badly."

Hermione said nothing.

Dracena sat again. The perfect posture was gone.

"I don't know how to do this." she said, softly. Hermione saw vulnerability for just a moment. It was quickly gone. She wiped angrily beneath one eye.

"I've never had to question any of it before."

"Dracena..."

"No. Please."

Hermione stopped.

"If you say something now, I'll lose my nerve."

Dracena's hands were trembling.

"I grew up knowing exactly how the world worked. Wizards had magic. Muggles didn't. We protected ourselves from them. We had knowledge they couldn't possibly understand. We had traditions older than their countries. And everyone I trusted told me what that meant."

A tear slipped down her cheek. She looked furious about it.

"Then I came here."

Hermione watched her.

"And **you** knew things I didn't."

More tears.

"You were better at spells than I was." Dracena laughed miserably. "Do you have any idea how much I hated you for that?"

"I had some indication." Hermione said, neutrally.

"I thought there had to be some reason it didn't count."

Hermione's expression changed. Dracena couldn't look at her.

"Because if it counted, then maybe other things counted too."

She wiped her face.

"And then Potter..."

"There it is."

"Please don't."

Hermione immediately fell silent, again, regretting the outburst.

Dracena's composure finally collapsed. She began weeping.

"He keeps asking me why."

Hermione knew exactly what she meant.

"And I don't know anymore. I don't know which things my family taught me because they're true and which things they taught me because their parents taught them. I don't know which traditions are beautiful and which ones are cruel. I don't know what I'm supposed to keep."

Hermione felt the ice inside her melt. Just slightly.

"And every time I try to talk to you, I say something awful."

"That is something of a talent." Hermione instantly regretted it. Old habits are hard to break.

Dracena gave her a watery glare.

Hermione smiled faintly.

Malfoy's face crumpled again.

"Please."

Hermione had never heard Malfoy say that word quite like this.

"Please, Granger." She reached across the table, stopped herself, then pulled her hand back. "Give me another chance."

Hermione stared at her.

"I know I don't deserve one."

"Dracena..."

"I am sorry." She could barely get the words out. "I am so terribly sorry."

Hermione's anger evaporated.

"I'm going to say stupid things again."

That surprised Hermione.

Dracena laughed through her tears. "I know myself well enough to promise you that. I'm going to assume something. Or say something Father taught me. Or ask you a question that's insulting and not realize it until you've already hexed me."

"I probably won't hex you."

"Thank you."

"Probably."

Dracena almost laughed.

"Just... tell me."

Hermione frowned. "Tell you?"

"When I'm doing it."

"You want me to correct you?"

"I will almost certainly hate it."

"That sounds healthy."

"I'll probably argue."

"Even healthier."

"And perhaps afterward I'll think about it."

Hermione looked at her for a long moment. "All right."

Dracena stared at her. "All right?"

"One more chance."

The relief on Dracena's face was startling. "Thank you." Dracena said, relief swimming over her.

Hermione nodded.

Dracena wiped her face and began reconstructing her dignity one piece at a time. It was almost impressive.

"So what are these wonderful traditions you're so worried about losing?" Hermione opened her mouth, and immediately regretted it again.

Dracena stopped.

"What?"

"I mean, you've mentioned them often enough. Your family traditions. Ancient wizarding culture." Hermione knew she made a mistake, but didn't know how to stop.

"Yes."

"I suppose I've always assumed it was mostly..." Hermione waved her hand.

"Mostly what?"

"Old families congratulating themselves for being old families." She internally winced. She had an idea of what Dracena was going through now.

Dracena became completely motionless.

Hermione heard her own words a second time, and winced.

"Oh."

"Yes."

"I didn't mean..."

"Didn't you?"

The tears were gone. That somehow made it worse.

Dracena stood.

"Dracena, wait."

"No. It's fine. I just spent half an hour apologizing for assuming an entire civilization was primitive because I knew nothing about it."

Hermione flushed.

"That isn't the same."

Dracena flinched. Hermione saw it. She actually saw the instant those words struck her. Dracena's jaw tightened.

Hermione prepared herself.

Here comes the explosion. she thought.

But none came. Dracena closed her eyes. Her fists clenched at her sides. She breathed in.

Once.
Twice.
When she opened her eyes, they were wet again. "No." she said carefully. "It isn't exactly the same."

Hermione relaxed slightly.

"But perhaps it's close enough that you could listen before deciding."

Hermione's mouth opened. The sharp response was already there. But this time she stopped.

Dracena was shaking. Just enough that Hermione could see how hard she was working not to become the person she'd been five minutes earlier.

Hermione closed her mouth. "All right."

Dracena blinked. "What?"

"I said all right. Tell me." Hermione gestured toward the chair. "Tell me."

Dracena didn't sit.

"About what?"

"Something I don't know."

That stopped Dracena.

Hermione leaned back. "You said I don't understand your culture."

"You don't."

There was no malice in it this time.

Hermione nodded. "Then explain it."

Dracena slowly sat down. For a while she said nothing.

"Do you know why old wizarding houses have family tapestries?"

Hermione shrugged.

"Genealogy. Obsession with bloodlines."

Dracena winced. Hermione did, too.

"Partly." Dracena said.

Hermione caught herself. "Sorry."

Dracena looked surprised, then continued.

"They're also memorials."

Hermione frowned. "To whom?"

"Everyone." Dracena's voice softened. "Not merely important people. Children who only lived three days. Cousins nobody remembers. Squibs."

Hermione looked surprised. "Squibs are included?"

"In ours." Dracena hesitated. "Some families removed them. Mine doesn't." Something in her tone suggested this distinction mattered greatly to her. "When someone dies, their thread changes. There are charms woven into it. You can touch their name and sometimes hear their voice."

Hermione sat forward. "What?"

"Only a few words. Usually."

Dracena was smiling now.

Not the Malfoy smirk. An actual smile.

"My great-great-grandmother laughs."

Hermione said nothing.

"I don't know what she's laughing at. Nobody does anymore. But if you touch her name, she laughs."

Dracena looked down at her hands. "When I was little, I used to sneak downstairs and touch it."

Hermione found herself smiling. "Why?"

"I liked her laugh."

Something passed between them. Hermione thought of photographs. Recordings. All the ways Muggles desperately tried to keep pieces of the dead.

"That isn't what I thought the tapestries were."

"I know."

Dracena looked at her.

"Are there other things like that?"

Dracena hesitated. "Yes."

"Would you show me?"

The question plainly startled her. "Why?"

"Because I don't know." Hermione gave her a rueful smile. "And apparently I've been forming opinions anyway."

Dracena stared at her.

Then the corner of her mouth lifted.

"That does sound familiar."

"Don't push it."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"So." Dracena said, "you really went to the Moon?"

"We did."

"How?"

Hermione smiled.

"That may take a while."

"I have time."

"And I want to know how that tapestry works."

"That may also take a while."

"I, too, have time."

They looked at one another.

It had been, by any reasonable measure, a disaster.

Dracena stood. "I should go."

"Yes."

She gathered her things.

At the door, Hermione spoke.

"Dracena?"

Dracena turned.

"Next time you don't know something about Muggles..."

"Yes?"

"Ask me."

Dracena nodded.

"Next time you don't know something about us..."

Hermione understood.

"I'll ask you."

Dracena nodded again.

"Goodnight, Granger."

"Goodnight, Malfoy."

Dracena reached the door.

"Dracena?"

She looked back.

Hermione smiled.

"We don't use candles."

Dracena's eyes narrowed.

"I hate you."

"I know."

They grinned at each other.

The door closed.

Hermione opened her book. She read the same sentence four times without understanding a word of it. Finally she closed it again.

"Voices in tapestries." Hermione murmured.

She desperately wanted to know how that worked.

Halfway down the corridor, Dracena stopped beneath a torch. She looked up at the flame.

"Airplanes." Dracena whispered. "Hundreds of people. Flying. Without a single spell."

She desperately wanted to know how that worked.

The Bruise



The three of them were laughing. That, by itself, would have been unimaginable months earlier. Hermione was sprawled sideways in one of the armchairs near the fire, an enormous book forgotten open across her lap. Harry sat on the rug with his back against the sofa. Dracena occupied the

sofa itself in a position she would have described as dignified, despite having one foot tucked beneath her and tears streaming down her face.

"I did not say that."

"You absolutely did." Hermione said.

"I said they were aesthetically offensive."

"You said automobiles were 'hideous little Muggle carriages that smell of explosions.'"

"They do!"

Potter was laughing too hard to speak. Dracena pointed accusingly at him.

"And you agreed with me!"

"I said some of them are ugly."

"You showed me the one with the wood stuck to the sides!"

"The station wagon?"

"Yes!"

Hermione dissolved into laughter again. Dracena tried to maintain her outrage for perhaps three seconds before losing the battle and laughing with them.

"I hate both of you."

"No, you don't." Harry said.

"I am reconsidering."

She wiped the tears from beneath her eyes. Hermione stopped laughing. Harry noticed Hermione first. He followed her gaze. The laughter died in his throat. Dracena was still smiling.

"What?" Dracena's smile faded. "What?"

Hermione slowly closed the book.

"Dracena."

Something in her voice made Dracena sit straighter.

"What?"

"How did you get that bruise?"

Dracena's hand rose automatically toward her face. Her fingers found the place where she'd wiped away the makeup. She froze. Harry could see it now, a dark purple mark beneath her left eye, extending across the top of her cheek.

Dracena stood abruptly. "It's nothing."

Hermione's expression hardened. "That isn't nothing."

"I walked into something."

"Dracena."

"I said it's nothing."

She reached for her bag.

Harry stood.

"Dracena."

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"Who hit you?" Harry blurted out.

Nobody moved. Dracena's face became utterly blank. Harry had seen that expression before. It was the "Malfoy face." The one she wore when she wanted the entire world locked outside.

Hermione rose. "Dracena..."

"Hermione." Dracena said, coldly.

Harry looked at her. Hermione looked back.

"Could you give us a minute?"

"Harry, this..."

"Please." Harry said, desperately.

Hermione's eyes went to Dracena. Dracena was staring at the floor. Hermione hesitated, then she walked over to her. "You know where I'll be."

Dracena nodded once. Hermione squeezed her arm. Dracena didn't respond. Hermione collected her books and left.

The door closed.

Harry didn't move toward Dracena. He desperately wanted to. Instead he waited. Dracena remained standing beside the sofa.

"Father hit me."

Harry felt something hot and violent ignite behind his ribs. Quashed it as best he could. He knew anger wasn't what Dracena needed. He desperately worked to display the calm he didn't feel.

"Why?"

She gave a tiny, bitter laugh. "Muggles."

Harry waited, and listened, desperately working his anger into his feet.

"I was telling him what Hermione taught me."

"About what?"

"Airplanes."

Harry blinked. "You didn't know about airplanes?"

Dracena closed her eyes. "Harry, please."

"Sorry."

She sat. Harry sat beside her, leaving space between them.

"I was telling him about them. And computers. And that Muggles went to the Moon." Her mouth twitched. "I still think Granger may be lying about

that."

"She's not."

"Yeah, I know." The smile vanished. "I told Father I'd been wrong about them."

Harry's stomach tightened.

"He asked where I'd learned all this." She swallowed. "I told him."

Harry knew what came next, but stayed silent.

"He became angry." Dracena touched her cheek. "He said hanging around with Mudbloods was beneath a Malfoy."

Potter's fists clenched, and Dracena noticed.

"Don't."

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're thinking very loudly."

Potter forced his hands open. "Then he hit you." Harry said, with a neutrality he didn't feel.

"Yes."

"Has he done it before?"

"No. No. Never. He was furious though." Dracena said. "I've never seen him like that."

Harry stared into the fire, working overtime to maintain the calm composure he didn't feel. There were perhaps a hundred things he wanted to say. Most of them were terrible.

Your father's a bastard .
No.
You can't go home .
Absolutely not.

You have to tell someone.
Maybe. Eventually.

He remembered a washroom and a girl crying because everyone seemed to think Harry required her to hate everything she'd ever loved before him. He remembered Hermione and Dracena sitting together for hours afterward, alternately arguing and explaining things to one another. He remembered Dracena trying to explain that family wasn't simply a collection of people she happened to share blood with.

It was her history.
Her culture.
Her place in the world.
And her father was part of that.
Harry chose his words carefully. "There's a Muggle term for this."

Dracena looked at him. "Of course there is."

"Domestic abuse."

Her brow furrowed. "What does that mean?"

"Someone hurting someone in their family. A husband hitting his wife. A parent hurting a child. Severe mistreatment. Things like that."

Dracena's expression changed. "I'm not a child."

"You're sixteen."

"That's old enough to..."

"Dracena."

She stopped. "In the Muggle world, what your father did can be a crime."

Her eyes widened. "A crime?"

"Yes."

"For striking his own daughter?"

"Especially his own daughter."

Dracena looked genuinely bewildered. "It's not... acceptable for us either."

Potter waited. "But?"

She looked uncomfortable. "It's private."

"No."

Her eyes flashed.

"Harry..."

"No."

"Don't tell me..."

"I'm not." His voice remained quiet. "I'm telling you what *I* believe."

Dracena looked away. "In old families, these things are handled within the family."

"And what happens if the person hurting you is the head of the family?" Harry asked, his anger slowly seeping into his voice.

She didn't answer. Harry immediately wished he'd phrased it differently. Dracena's eyes filled again.

"I never thought he'd hit me."

Harry's anger disappeared beneath something much sadder. "That's unfortunately how it works sometimes."

She looked at him. "How do you know?"

Harry hesitated.

"Did your Aunt and Uncle...?"

"Sort of."

"How..."

"They kept me in a cupboard under the stairs."

Dracena looked horrified.

"They gave Dudley, their son, two rooms. One for all his toys. Another for his bedroom."

"Oh Merlin."

"They never hit me, or anything like that." Harry added, quickly. "But they... It's difficult. They had a difficult relationship with my parents. And I think it spilled out onto me."

Dracena looked at Harry.

"It's the reason why I left with Hagrid, despite being terrified."

"So you think I should leave my family?" Dracena asked, fear in her voice.

Harry didn't know what to say. Exactly the place Potter had desperately hoped not to end up.

"No."

She looked at him sharply.

"No?"

"I think you're sixteen."

"But you just said..."

"I know what I said."

Harry rubbed his forehead. "I'm making a mess of this."

"You're doing better than I did with Hermione." Dracena said, bitterly.

That almost made him laugh. Almost.

Dracena's voice broke. "But Harry, I'm only sixteen."

"I know."

"What am I supposed to do? Get a job? Find a house? Disown my own father?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I don't know."

She stared at him. Harry hated those words, but they were true. "I don't know yet."

Dracena looked down. Harry stared into the fire.

"I know your family is important to you."

She didn't answer.

"Your heritage is important to you."

Dracena remained silent.

"And I've been trying to understand that."

"I know."

"I really am."

"I know."

"But..."

He stopped.

Every version of the sentence sounded wrong.

But your father...
But your traditions...
But your family...

All of them turned this into a choice. Harry didn't want to make her choose. Then he looked at the bruise again. He realized there was one thing he could say.

"But you're important to me."

Dracena looked up. Harry swallowed. "Merlin knows why." he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I heard you."

"Of course you did."

Despite herself, her mouth twitched.

Harry became serious again. "I want to understand your family. Your traditions. All of it. I want you to teach me."

Dracena stared at him.

"And there are things I'm probably never going to understand." He took a breath. "But some things aren't complicated for me."

Her eyes flicked toward him.

"A father hurting his daughter because he's angry is one of them."

"Harry..."

"Dracena, please. Let me finish first." His voice wasn't loud. It didn't need to be. "I can't let that go."

Dracena's expression hardened defensively.

"He's still my father."

"I know."

"I love him."

"I know."

"He has been good to me my entire life."

"I believe you."

"You don't sound like you do."

"I do."

Harry turned toward her.

"And he hit you."

Dracena flinched. Harry immediately softened.

"I'm sorry."

She wiped her eyes.

"He made a mistake."

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe it was one terrible mistake he'll regret for the rest of his life." Harry hoped so.

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to make sure it never happens again."

"How?" Dracena pleaded.

"I don't know."

Again. Those horrible, honest words. Dracena began crying.

"I don't know either."

Harry moved closer, almost touching her. "I care about you, Dracena." he spat out, unexpectedly. He immediately regretted it. Almost. She looked at him.

"I wouldn't want this to happen to anyone. Hermione. Ron. Neville. Someone I've never met."

His voice caught. "But you?"

Dracena's lower lip trembled.

"Especially you."

That did it. Whatever remained of Dracena's dignity simply disintegrated. She made an awful little choking noise and threw herself at him, wrapping

her arms around him as she wept. Harry barely caught her.

Dracena buried her face against his chest and sobbed. Not the picturesque single tear she would have tolerated in public. She ugly-cried. Her shoulders shook. Her breathing came in ragged gasps. She grabbed fistfuls of Potter's jumper and held on as though someone might pull her away. Harry wrapped both arms around her and held her.

"It's all right."

"No, it isn't."

"No" Harry corrected himself. "No, it isn't."

She cried harder.

Harry rested his cheek against her hair. After a while, Dracena whispered:

"Why do you care so much?"

Harry closed his eyes. There were moments when a person could still retreat. This was one of them.

He could make a joke.
He could say, *Because we're friends*.
He could tell her *this is what anyone would do* .
All technically true.
All cowardly.
Harry decided he wasn't going to be a coward.

"Because I'm in love with you."

Dracena stopped crying. Instantly. Harry immediately wished for death.

She slowly pulled away.

"What?"

"I said..."

"I heard you."

"Oh."

"You love me."

"Apparently."

"Apparently?"

"I'm having a difficult evening."

Dracena stared at him.

"How long?" she said, simply.

"What?"

"How long have you known?"

Harry considered it. "I don't know."

"Those words are helpful."

"I think I've been doing it for longer than I've known I was doing it."

Dracena's eyes filled again.

"Oh, don't cry again."

"I'm not!"

"You are."

"Shut up."

Harry smiled a bit, and Dracena punched him weakly in the shoulder. Then she grabbed the front of his jumper again.

She looked directly into his eyes. "I love you too."

Potter forgot every intelligent thought he'd ever had.

"What?"

"Oh, don't make me say it again."

"I think you should."

"Harry."

"Just to make sure."

She glared at him through smeared mascara.

"I love you."

Harry smiled at her. Dracena's face crumpled again.

"Oh, damn you."

They kissed each other. It wasn't elegant. It was messy and awkward. Their noses bumped. Potter's hand went somewhere completely useless before he figured out where to put it.

Dracena was still crying. Then Harry was laughing. Then she was laughing and crying simultaneously. When they separated, their foreheads remained together.

"This is an absolute disaster." Dracena whispered.

"Yeah."

"My father is going to hate this."

Potter's smile disappeared. Dracena saw it. Reality came flooding back.

Her family.

His friends.

The things she believed.

The things he couldn't accept.

The war everyone could feel somewhere beyond the castle walls, still distant but getting closer.

Dracena looked frightened again.

"And if we can't make this work?"

"Dracena, don't."

"Seriously. If we can't?" Her voice was smaller now. "I don't want to lose you."

Harry opened his mouth. He desperately wanted to say, "You won't." The words were right there. Easy. Two words, and the fear would leave her face. He'd said things like that before. He meant them, too. As if wanting something badly enough made it a promise. But it never worked.

He closed his mouth. Dracena noticed.

"You can't say it."

"I want to."

Somehow that seemed to hurt her more.

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

She looked away. Potter wanted to take it back. He wanted to say the easy thing and deal with whether it was true later.

"I don't know."

She looked at him again.

"I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what you're going to do. I don't know what I'm going to have to do."

Her jaw tightened.

"You mean my father. You mean..."

Harry didn't answer.

"Say it."

"Your father."

For a moment she looked furious, then her face dropped. The fear was evident

"I love him."

"I know."

"He's wrong."

"I know."

"Those can both be true, Potter."

"I know."

"Stop saying that."

"Then stop saying things I know."

A tiny, furious laugh escaped her before she could stop it. Then it was gone.

"I don't know what I'll do."

Harry swallowed. "Neither do I."

"That's a bloody awful foundation for a relationship."

"It could be worse."

That almost got another laugh. Almost.

"So that's it?" she asked. "We don't know?"

Harry shook his head.

"No."

"No?"

"We don't lie about not knowing."

Dracena stared at him. Harry took her hand. "I can't promise you that everything will work out." She looked down at their fingers.

"I can't promise your father will accept me. Or Hermione. Or that you'll agree with me about everything someday."

"God forbid."

"Exactly."

That earned him the faintest smile.

"And I can't promise I'm never going to ask something from you that you can't give me."

Her smile disappeared.

"Neither can I."

"I know."

She squeezed his hand.

Potter looked at the bruise on her face.

"But I can promise you something else."

"What?"

"If I don't know, I'll tell you I don't know."

Dracena's eyes filled.

"If I'm frightened, I'll tell you I'm frightened. If I'm angry, I'll try to tell you why before I do something stupid."

"Try?"

"I'm Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, not a miracle worker."

She snorted.

"And if something you believe matters to you, I'll listen before I decide it's stupid."

"That's an improvement."

"And if I think it's wrong, I'll tell you."

"I would expect nothing less."

Harry nodded.

"And I need the same from you."

Dracena was quiet for a moment. "You have it."

He touched her cheek very gently, careful to stay far away from the bruise.

"And this?"

Dracena went still.

"This is one of the things I can't compromise about."

She looked at him.

"I am not asking you to stop loving your father."

Her eyes widened slightly.

"I'm not asking you to stop being a Malfoy."

That one hit harder. Potter could tell.

"I'm asking you to let me help make sure nobody gets to hurt you because they love you."

Dracena closed her eyes. Another tear escaped. "Even him?"

Harry hesitated. "Especially him."

She opened her eyes.

"Why especially?"

"Because if some stranger hit you, you'd know exactly what to do."

Dracena stared at him. Harry saw that she understood.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

She leaned against him again, resting her head against his shoulder. Harry put his arm around her.

"Hermione is waiting outside, isn't she?"

"Probably."

"Listening at the door?"

"Definitely."

From the other side of the door came an indignant: "I AM NOT."

Dracena stared at it. Harry stared at it. Then Dracena laughed. A real laugh. Harry joined her.

"Come in, Granger." Dracena called.

The door opened almost immediately. Hermione stood there holding her enormous book.

"I couldn't hear much anyway. Besides, I was reading."

"In the corridor?"

"The lighting is excellent."

Dracena rolled her eyes.

Hermione saw them holding hands, and stopped.

She looked at Dracena. She Looked at Harry, staring at their hands clasped together.

"Oh." Hermione grinned widely.

Dracena immediately became defensive. "Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"Your face did."

Harry started laughing. Hermione sat beside Dracena. For a moment, none of them spoke. Then Dracena leaned against her too. Hermione stiffened in surprise, then put an arm around her.

Her father was still her father. Her family was still her family. Harry was still Harry. Hermione was still an insufferable Muggle-born know-it-all

who had somehow become one of the people Dracena trusted most in the world. Nothing had been solved.

Tomorrow there would be professors to tell, decisions to make, arguments to have, and consequences none of them could predict.

But tonight Dracena sat between two people who loved her. For the moment, that was enough.

The Boundary



Snow covered the grounds of Hogwarts.

Harry stood beside Dracena near the carriages, hands shoved into his pockets while students hurried around them with trunks, owls, parcels, and the particular chaos produced by several hundred teenagers simultaneously trying to go home for Christmas.

Dracena looked immaculate. Of course she did. Harry had discovered that Dracena Malfoy could survive examinations, windstorms, emotional breakdowns, and at least one catastrophic encounter with a self-inking quill while remaining more presentable than he looked immediately after getting dressed.

"You could stay." Harry said, simply.

Dracena looked at him. "We've discussed this."

"I know."

"Three times."

"I know."

"Four, now."

Harry frowned. "You're sure?"

Her expression softened. "Yes."

"You don't have to go home."

"I know. I've spoken to Dumbledore."

Potter stopped. "When?"

"Yesterday."

"And?"

"And that conversation was between Professor Dumbledore and me."

"Dracena."

She sighed. "I have arrangements."

"What kind of arrangements?"

"The kind which mean you needn't spend Christmas imagining me locked in a tower."

"I wasn't going to imagine a tower."

"You were absolutely going to imagine a tower."

Harry conceded this with a shrug. Dracena stepped closer. "If I decide I shouldn't remain at home, I have somewhere to go."

"Where?"

"Somewhere safe."

"Dracena."

"Harry." She looked directly into his eyes. That stopped him. She rarely used his first name. "I have thought about this."

Harry searched her face. She wasn't frightened. Nervous, yes, but underneath it was something he'd been seeing more often lately. It was resolve.

"There are things I need to do."

"At home."

"Yes."

"With your father."

She paused, silently. "Among other things."

Harry thought he understood, at least partially.

"You don't have to prove anything."

"I'm not."

"You don't have to go back there just to prove you're not afraid."

"I'm not doing that either."

"Then why?"

Dracena looked toward Castle Hogwarts. For a moment she seemed to search for the words. "Because it's my home."

Harry remained silent.

"My room is there. My mother is there. My family's history is there. My great-great-grandmother who laughs when you touch her name on the family tapestry is there."

Potter smiled faintly.

"I still want to see that."

"You will."

The certainty of it warmed his heart.

"I'm not surrendering my home because something terrible happened in it."

Harry's smile disappeared.

"And I'm not surrendering my father either."

"I know."

"But I'm also not going home and pretending nothing happened."

Potter nodded.

"Okay."

Dracena blinked.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

"That's all?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know. Argue."

"I'm trying this new thing where I respect your decisions." Harry said, flatly.

"How awful." Dracena said, smiling

"I hate it." Harry said, smiling back

Potter took her hand.

"If anything happens..."

"I'll send an owl."

"Immediately."

"Immediately."

"Not three hours later after you've decided whether it's sufficiently serious."

Dracena looked offended.

"I would not do that."

"You absolutely would."

"I'll send an owl." she said, finally.

"Promise?"

She squeezed his hand.

"I promise."

Potter relaxed slightly.

"Good."

"And you?"

"What about me?" Harry asked.

"You're really spending Christmas with your aunt and uncle?"

"Yeah."

Dracena's eyebrows rose. "Voluntarily."

"Mostly."

"These are the people you spent half the year describing as intolerable."

"They're complicated."

Dracena stared at him.

Potter stared back. Dracena's mouth curled upward.

"Oh, don't." Harry said, smiling.

"Potter."

"Don't."

" *Your* family is complicated."

"Shut up." Harry grinned.

" *You* are returning to them despite having serious disagreements with them."

"Dracena."

"And *you've* decided that perhaps preserving a relationship doesn't require approving of everything they've ever..."

Harry kissed her. It was an extremely effective method of ending the conversation. When they separated, Dracena looked insufferably pleased.

"You know I'm right."

"I know you're impossible."

"You love me."

"Against my better judgment."

"Your judgment has always been suspect."

Harry kissed her again.

When they finally pulled apart, the noise of the station seemed to return around them.

Dracena rested her forehead against his.

"I'll miss you."

Potter smiled.

"I'll miss you too."

"I'll write."

"You'd better."

"And Potter?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to be all right."

Harry looked into her eyes. Months ago he would have answered automatically. "I know." This time he didn't. Instead, he said, "I believe you."

Dracena smiled. That was better.

She kissed his cheek, picked up her bag, and walked toward the carriage waiting for her. Halfway there she turned. Harry was still watching. Dracena raised one eyebrow.

He waved. She rolled her eyes, then waved back.

They went home.

Malfoy Manor had never seemed particularly imposing to Dracena. Other people found it so. Today, she understood why. The long drive up to the iron gates. The ancient stone. The portraits. The enormous entrance hall designed by some distant ancestor who believed ceilings were a sign of weakness unless they were at least thirty feet high.

To Dracena it was simply home.
The clock in the west hall still ran four minutes slow.
The third stair still creaked.
Someone had decorated the banister with winter holly. Her mother's decorations.

Dracena touched one of the leaves as she passed. She had missed this place. That realization brought an unexpected lump to her throat. She had

missed it terribly. Nothing about what happened had changed that.

Her mother embraced her. Dracena held on longer than usual. Neither commented upon it.

Dinner was polite. Painfully polite. Her father asked about examinations. Dracena answered. Her mother discussed Christmas plans.

Nobody mentioned Potter.
Nobody mentioned Granger.
Nobody mentioned the bruise, now faded to a faint yellow shadow that cosmetics could easily hide. Dracena did not hide it.

Her father noticed.
She knew he noticed.
Neither said anything.
Not yet. It came shortly after dinner.

A house-elf found her in the drawing room.

"Miss Dracena's father requests her presence in his study."

Of course he did. Dracena put down her book. Her hands were cold. She stood outside the study door for several seconds.

I'm going to be all right. She had told Harry that. Now she had to decide whether she'd believed herself. Dracena opened the door. Her father sat behind his desk.

Lucius Malfoy looked exactly as he always had. That was almost worse. Instead of the monster many people wanted to imagine, there was her father. The man who'd taught her to ride a broom. The man who had carried her through this very house when she'd fallen asleep at Christmas parties. The man who'd taught her their family history. The man whose approval had mattered to her for as long as she could remember.

The man who had hit her.

"Close the door, Dracena." She did.

"Sit."

She remained standing. Lucius noticed. His expression tightened.

"I understand." he began, "that there are several matters concerning your behavior at school which we need to..."

"Father."

He stopped. Dracena had interrupted Lucius Malfoy. There were probably ancestral portraits throughout the house fainting in horror.

"Excuse me?"

Her heart was pounding.

She could hear Harry's voice in her head. "If I'm frightened, I'll tell you I'm frightened."

Fine. She was frightened. Terrified, actually. She continued anyway.

"You will never hit me again." Lucius stared at her. Silence filled the study. Dracena's knees felt weak.

Her father slowly put down the parchment he'd been holding. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"Dracena."

"You will never raise your hand against me in anger, again."

Lucius stood. Dracena's entire body screamed at her to step backward. She didn't. Her father looked genuinely astonished. Not enraged. Not yet, anyway. Just unable to believe what he was hearing. "And if I do?"

Dracena hadn't expected that. She had rehearsed this conversation a dozen times. Lucius had never said that.

"What?"

"You've apparently decided to issue your father an ultimatum." His voice remained eerily calm. "So I should like to understand it." He walked around the desk toward her. "If I strike you again, then what?" His voice

wasn't angry. He sounded genuinely confused. This made it far more terrifying.

Dracena opened her mouth. Nothing came out. Lucius waited.

She could lie. She could invent something impressive. She could threaten to go to Dumbledore. Threaten to leave. Threaten to expose him. She had backup plans. She had people who would help her. But none of those things was the reason she'd come into this room.

"I don't know."

Something flickered across Lucius's face.

Dracena swallowed. "I don't know what I'll do."

"Then this is a rather empty threat."

"It isn't a threat."

"What is it?"

"A boundary."

Lucius's expression suggested the word offended him personally.

Dracena continued. "I don't know what happens if you cross it." Her voice trembled. She hated that. "But I know I won't accept it."

"Accept it?"

"No."

"You are my daughter."

"Yes."

"You are sixteen years old."

"Yes."

"You live beneath my roof."

"Yes."

"Everything you possess..."

"Father."

Lucius's eyes flashed.

Dracena nearly stopped. Nearly. "If you have a problem with me, tell me."

He stared at her.

"If I embarrass you, tell me. If I disgrace the family, tell me. If you think my friends are beneath me, tell me." Her voice grew stronger. "You may shout if you absolutely must."

One of Lucius's eyebrows rose.

"But you will use your words." Dracena's eyes burned. "You will **not** use your hands."

Lucius said nothing.

"Have I made myself clear?"

The instant the words left her mouth, Dracena realized she'd just asked Lucius Malfoy whether *she* had made *herself* clear. There was a peculiar ringing in her ears.

Her father stared at her. Dracena stared back. Something moved behind his eyes. Anger? Certainly anger. Indignation? Absolutely. But there was something else. Something Dracena couldn't identify. Lucius walked toward her. Every instinct told her to move.

She stayed.

He stopped directly in front of her. Dracena had forgotten how tall he was.

"Potter."

Of course. Dracena's fear transformed instantly into irritation. "This isn't just about Potter."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"Hermione helped."

Lucius's mouth tightened at the name. "That..."

"Don't."

His eyes returned to hers.

"Don't what?"

"Don't say it. Don't call her that word."

"I haven't said anything."

"You were about to."

Lucius's eyebrows rose. Dracena realized she'd done it again. If she was going to be executed, she might as well make the evening worthwhile.

"Her name is Hermione Granger."

"I am aware."

"She's my friend."

Lucius's jaw tightened. Dracena's heart hammered.

"And Potter?" She hesitated. This was perhaps not the ideal moment. Then again, there was probably never going to be an ideal moment. "He's more than that."

Lucius closed his eyes. For one brief, glorious second, Dracena thought he looked as though he had developed a headache. She almost smiled.

"Of course he is."

Dracena said nothing. Lucius turned away. He walked toward the fireplace. For several seconds, he merely stared into it.

"You've changed."

Dracena felt unexpectedly wounded. "No. I am still a Malfoy."

Her father looked over his shoulder. She hadn't intended to say it so desperately.

"I am."

Lucius studied her.

"I love this family."

Silence.

"I love Mother."

Silence.

"I love you."

That one changed something. Barely, but she saw it.

Dracena's voice trembled.

"I don't want another family."

Lucius turned fully toward her.

"I don't want another name. I don't want to become someone else."

She wiped angrily at one eye.

"But I am not going to believe something merely because you believe it anymore."

Lucius's face hardened.

"I see." Lucius said, icily.

"No." Dracena shook her head. "I don't think you do." She drew herself upright. "You taught me what our name means."

Something flickered in his expression. Something unreadable.

"You taught me that a Malfoy does not grovel. That we do not allow ourselves to be intimidated. That we know our history and defend what belongs to us."

Lucius stared at her. Dracena's voice became quieter.

"I belong to me."

Lucius didn't move. Neither did she. For the first time in her life, Dracena looked at her father and realized he didn't know what to say. It was terrifying. It was also exhilarating. Somewhere beneath his anger, beneath the affront to his dignity and the absolute certainty that his daughter had become intolerably insolent... Dracena thought she saw it. Pride? Not approval. Certainly not approval. But pride.

That might have been worse.

Lucius drew a slow breath. "Go to your room."

Dracena's stomach dropped. "Father..."

"I said go to your room." His voice gave her nothing.

Dracena wanted to ask.
Are we all right?
Do you understand?
Do you still love me?

She asked none of them. "Goodnight, Father."

She turned toward the door.

"Dracena."

Her hand stopped on the handle. She looked back.

Lucius stood beside the fire. He seemed older than he had when she'd entered. For several seconds neither spoke. Then his eyes moved toward the fading bruise beneath hers.

Something tightened in his face. Again, something unreadable.

"Goodnight."

Dracena opened the door. She stepped into the corridor, then closed it behind her. She leaned against the wood and released a breath she'd

apparently been holding since September.

Her hands were shaking.

Inside the study, Lucius Malfoy remained beside the fire. His daughter had defied him. In his own study. Under his own roof. She had interrupted him, challenged him, questioned his judgment, defended a Muggle-born, admitted an attachment to Harry bloody Potter, and concluded by informing him of the proper conduct expected inside the Malfoy family.

The insolence was breathtaking. Lucius stared into the fire. Then, despite himself, the faintest trace of something appeared at the corner of his mouth.

He suppressed it immediately. The girl had stood her ground. He had taught her that. Perhaps that was the trouble.

Or perhaps...

Lucius's eyes fell upon an old family tapestry hanging opposite his desk. Generations of Malfoys stared silently back at him. He looked toward the closed door. His expression hardened again.

"Potter." he muttered.

The fire cracked.

Somewhere upstairs, Dracena Malfoy began writing an owl.

The Late Night Discussion



The fire turned green precisely as the clock in his study struck the first chime at eleven. Lucius Malfoy was waiting. He stood alone in his study, one hand resting upon the silver head of his cane, watching ordinary flames transform. Green fire climbed the grate. A face appeared within it. Pale. Serpentine.

"Lucius."

"My Lord."

Lucius bowed.

"I trust preparations are proceeding."

"They are."

"The Ministry?"

"Three additional members have agreed to cooperate. Two others are sympathetic but unwilling to commit themselves openly."

"Cowards."

"Politicians."

Voldemort's mouth twitched in a vile smile.

"Is there a difference?"

"Occasionally."

Lucius allowed himself the faintest smile in return. Voldemort did not return it.

"The funds we discussed?"

"Transferred through Gringotts."

"And our friends in America?"

"I have spoken with them."

"They will support us?"

"They will support *me* ."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

Lucius continued before the distinction could become an issue.

"And I have reminded them that supporting *me* means supporting *you* ."

The green flames shifted.

Lucius waited. He had been doing a great deal of that lately.

Waiting. Watching. Thinking. All extremely dangerous habits.

When this had begun, years ago, the arrangement had seemed almost elegant. Voldemort possessed power. Lucius possessed money, influence, connections and a name that opened doors which even the threat of violence could not.

Their interests aligned. The old families had been losing influence for generations. The Ministry increasingly concerned itself with regulating ancient institutions it barely understood. Customs that had survived centuries were suddenly treated as embarrassing relics. Overseas wizards, and Muggle influence seeped farther into their world every year. Voldemort promised restoration. Order. Power returned to those Lucius believed had earned the right to wield it.

Lucius had never imagined himself a fanatic. Fanatics were tiresome. He had imagined himself a patron.

Money here.
An introduction there.
A Ministry official persuaded.
A newspaper influenced .
An inconvenient investigation made to disappear.
Politics.

Then Voldemort had begun asking for other things.
Names.
Information.
Places.
People.

Lucius had provided them. Then came threats. Then disappearances. Then bodies. By then, Lucius's hands were dirty enough that objecting to the mud seemed rather pointless.

And besides? He still agreed with much of it.

Dracena couldn't sleep. This was becoming an irritating feature of this Christmas vacation.

She had gone to bed at ten. She had read until ten thirty. She had put out the lamp, turned it back on, read another chapter, turned it out again,

rearranged her pillows, decided the room was too warm, decided five minutes later that it was too cold, and spent an unreasonable amount of time staring at the ceiling while thinking about Potter.

Mostly Potter.
Hermione, too.
Her father.

Quite a lot of her father, actually. That conversation still bothered her. *You will never hit me again*. She'd said it. To Lucius Malfoy. More astonishingly, he had listened. Well. He had stood there looking like someone had force-fed him a lemon and then sent her to her room, which wasn't quite the same thing as listening.

But he hadn't shouted. Hadn't threatened her. Definitely hadn't struck her again. He'd said goodnight. Dracena still didn't know what any of that meant.

At ten till eleven, she finally surrendered. If she couldn't sleep, she could at least be unable to sleep while eating something. She pulled on a dressing gown and slippers and slipped into the corridor.

Malfoy Manor was strange at night. The house was never truly dark. Tiny enchanted lamps glowed near the floor, just bright enough to keep someone from breaking their neck on the stairs. Moonlight came through the enormous windows. Portraits snored softly.

Dracena descended toward the kitchen. She was halfway down the main staircase when she noticed the light beneath her father's study door.

She stopped. Father was awake. That wasn't particularly interesting. Father was frequently awake at ridiculous hours doing whatever it was important men did at ridiculous hours.

Dracena continued downstairs until she heard a voice. Was it her father's?

Father might have had visitors. Father always had visitors. Politicians. Ministry officials. Businessmen. Foreign wizards with expensive robes and unpleasant handshakes. People who seemed to exist primarily to drink Father's brandy and discuss things they didn't want children hearing.

Dracena was sixteen. Naturally, she considered " *things adults didn't want children hearing*" to be one of the most interesting categories of information in existence.

She glanced toward the kitchen. Then toward the study.

Snack.
Study.
Snack.
Study.

Dracena sighed. The snack could wait. She padded toward the door, noticing the flickering glow of the study's fireplace spilling through the narrow gap beneath it. She suddenly realized the fireplace glow was green, not orange. A Floo connection?

The atmosphere changed. Dracena couldn't have explained it afterward. Every instinct she possessed suddenly told her that she should go upstairs. Now.

She didn't. Of course she didn't. She leaned closer. Her father's voice reached her. He was talking to someone. Someone whose voice was unnaturally high and cold, with a soft, snake-like hiss that made the little hairs on her arms stand on end.

"Lucius."

He returned his attention to the fire.

"My apologies, my Lord"

"You seem distracted."

"My daughter returned home for Christmas."

Something changed in Voldemort's expression. Lucius noticed.

"Ah. Dracena."

"Yes."

"I have heard interesting things about your daughter."

Lucius's grip tightened around the cane.

My Lord. Dracena froze. There were not many people Lucius Malfoy called *my Lord*.

She brought her head down to stare through the crack. She saw HIS FACE.

Oh. Voldemort. Her father was talking to Voldemort.

Dracena's first reaction was not exactly surprise . She had always assumed Father knew Voldemort. Why wouldn't he? Father knew everyone. He knew Ministers and former Ministers and people who wanted to become Ministers. He knew people at Gringotts, people in France, people in America, people whose names appeared in the Prophet and people whose names absolutely did not.

Everybody knew the stories about the Malfoys during the war. Father didn't talk about them. Mother didn't talk about them. Whenever Dracena had asked questions as a child, the answers had consisted mostly of variations on *those were complicated times*. So she'd filled in the blanks herself.

There were uglier stories, of course. Everybody had heard them. Disappearances. Torture. Murder. Dracena had never been certain how much of that to believe. People said horrible things about important families. People particularly enjoyed saying horrible things about the Malfoys.

Some of them were even true.

But...

"*My Lord*."
Not *Lord Voldemort*.

Not even *Voldemort*.
"*My Lord*."

Dracena suddenly became considerably more interested.

"Teenagers are inexhaustible sources of gossip." Lucius continued.

"This is more than gossip." Voldemort smiled a reptilian smile. "She has become close to Harry Potter."

There it was. Lucius said nothing.

"Very close, according to what I've been told."

"Yes."

The admission tasted unpleasant.

"You approve?"

"No."

Voldemort smiled again.

"But you permit it."

"Dracena is sixteen."

"And?"

"Meaning she is at an age when forbidding something is an excellent way of ensuring she does it more enthusiastically."

Voldemort laughed. "Practical as always."

"I try, my Lord."

"Perhaps her adolescent infatuation can be made useful." Voldemort said, coldly.

Lucius became very still. "How?"

Voldemort's expression changed. Lucius knew that expression. He'd seen it before someone disappeared

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Dracena nearly opened the door purely to inform her father that her "adolescent infatuation" bloody well was not something to be used. Fortunately, some surviving instinct for self-preservation prevented this.

Something tightened in Dracena's stomach as she listened to her father and Voldemort discuss her.

"Potter trusts her."

Lucius said nothing.

"He allows her close to him. Closer than any of us could get."

Lucius knew where this was going. Some desperate part of him hoped he was wrong.

"Give her something." Voldemort said.

Lucius stared into the flames, his jaw moving slowly.

"Something?"

"A potion. A cursed object. Whatever method you think she could conceal."

Lucius's hand tightened around the cane.

"And?"

Voldemort looked almost amused.

"Surely I needn't explain everything to you." Voldemort was going to, anyway. "She gets close to Potter. She waits until they're alone."

Lucius remembered his daughter in his study earlier that night. *He's more than that,* she said. Lucius had known. He hated knowing.

Voldemort continued. "Then she kills him."

For several seconds Dracena genuinely didn't understand.

Then she *did* .

Her stomach turned. Voldemort was talking about **killing Harry.** And he wanted... *HER*. To do it.

Dracena put a hand over her mouth.

"No." The word escaped before Lucius had decided to say it.

The green flames hissed. Voldemort's expression didn't change.

"What did you say?"

Lucius felt his heartbeat in his throat. He could soften it.

It would be impractical. he could say.
She's unreliable.
There are better methods.
Politics. Always politics. His jaw tightened.

"I said no."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. Lucius drew himself upright. "I will not ask my daughter to murder Harry Potter."

"Because she's fond of him?"

"Because she is MY daughter."

Voldemort stared at him. Lucius stared back.

"How sentimental."

"Perhaps."

"You disappoint me."

"I have survived greater tragedies. I will survive this one."

That was dangerous. Lucius knew it the moment he said it. The green flames seemed to grow colder. Voldemort's voice became soft.

"Careful, Lucius."

Every instinct told him to yield. Lucius did not. Voldemort watched him for several seconds through the fire.

"Very well." Voldemort said.

Lucius almost relaxed. Almost.

"She needn't kill him. Have her bring Potter to me."

"No." This time there was no hesitation.

Voldemort's face twisted.

"Lucius."

"I said No, my Lord."

"She need only to arrange..."

"I understood you."

"Then perhaps you misunderstand your position."

Lucius felt something inside him settle. Strangely, that made this easier.

"No, my Lord." He idly adjusted his cufflinks. "I think perhaps you misunderstand **mine** ."

"Explain." Voldemort said, coldly

Lucius walked toward the fireplace. "Dracena is not a Death Eater."

"Not yet she isn't."

Lucius ignored that.

"I will do what you ask of me." Lucius continued. "The people who have pledged themselves to our cause will do what is required of them."

"Our cause."

"Yes. But my daughter is not one of them."

"Your daughter is a resource uniquely positioned to..."

"She is **not a resource.** " The words came harder than Lucius intended.

Dracena knew her father's anger. She heard it clearly. She knew the quiet, poisonous voice that had terrified servants, Ministry officials, shopkeepers and, occasionally, Dracena herself.

Dracena listened as her father pushed back against The Dark Lord.

She thought back to Voldemort's statement calling her *a resource*. Was he pleading? It almost sounded like he was.

She remembered what she told her father earlier that night: *I belong to me*. He **had** listened. The stubborn, arrogant, impossible ass had actually **listened.** Dracena closed her eyes. She loved him. Merlin help her, she loved that man.

Voldemort went silent.

Lucius heard Dracena's voice in his memory. *I belong to me* . He had been furious when she'd said it. He had considered it adolescent insolence. Now another man was discussing his daughter as though she were a useful piece on a chessboard. Lucius discovered that he despised it.

"Dracena has made no oath to you." he said.

"Her father has."

"Yes, he has"

"You would deny me victory because your daughter has developed a schoolgirl fascination with Potter?"

"No." Lucius surprised himself with the answer. "I would deny you my daughter, until she decides to ally herself with you of her own right."

Voldemort's face hardened. "You forget yourself."

Lucius almost laughed. Perhaps he did.

"No. I remember myself perfectly." He walked closer to the flames. "My name is Lucius Malfoy."

Voldemort's lip curled. "I know your name."

"Then remember what comes with it." Lucius felt the old instincts returning. He remembered how his father always talked about negotiation. This was the language he understood best.

"You need me."

Voldemort's eyes flashed. "Do I?"

"Yes." Lucius said it calmly. "Very badly, in fact."

"Be careful."

"Oh, now wait." Lucius raised one hand.

Voldemort looked stunned by the audacity.

Lucius continued. "You need my money. You need my connections inside the Ministry. You need my contacts abroad. You need the families who joined you because I told them you were worth supporting."

"Do you imagine yourself indispensable?"

"No." That answer seemed to surprise Voldemort. "I imagine myself extremely inconvenient to lose." Lucius allowed that to sit between them.

"Kill me if you like."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

"Threaten my wife. My Family. Burn my house down. You are certainly capable of all of this." Lucius's voice remained conversational. "But then tomorrow morning several very wealthy people are going to ask why Lucius Malfoy disappeared immediately after speaking with you."

Voldemort said nothing.

"And if instead I simply withdraw my support?" Lucius shrugged. "I make several Floo calls." His heart was hammering now. He refused to let it show. "I tell people I've reconsidered."

"You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?"

"You would sacrifice everything you've worked for?"

Lucius considered that.

"No. But I would sacrifice *you* ."

The green flames surged. Voldemort's face contorted with rage.

Lucius gripped his cane. For one insane second he wondered whether one could cast a Killing Curse through a Floo connection. He sincerely hoped not.

"You dare threaten me?"

"I am not threatening you."

Lucius heard Dracena again. *It's a boundary.* Merlin. He almost laughed. His daughter was going to be the death of him.

"I am explaining the arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

"Yes."

Lucius's voice hardened.

"I support you." He ticked the points off on one hand calmly. "I help fund you. I persuade others to fund you. I give you access to people and institutions you could otherwise reach only through violence."

Voldemort's face flared.

"I will continue doing those things." Lucius leaned slightly closer. "But Dracena is not part of the arrangement." He took a breath, and stared directly at the Dark Lord. "She does not carry messages for you." Lucius's voice became colder. "She does not spy for you. She does not lure Potter anywhere. And she does not kill for you. At least, not until she decides to join you on her own."

Voldemort stared at him. Lucius returned the stare.

"If you want Harry Potter dead, kill him yourself."

"Lucius..."

"Or get someone else. Leave my daughter out of it."

Dracena's heart hammered in her chest. She suddenly realized she should not be standing here.

She backed away slowly, then ran. She hurried toward the kitchen. The snack suddenly seemed extremely important.

For several seconds neither man spoke. Then Voldemort smiled. It was not pleasant.

"Interesting."

Lucius waited.

"You've grown a spine."

"I've always had one."

"You've simply preferred not to use it." Lucius couldn't argue with that.

Voldemort's eyes seemed to look through him.

"Does she know?"

"Know what?"

"What her father has done for me."

Lucius felt cold. "She knows enough."

"Does she know everything?"

"No."

"Perhaps she should."

There was the threat. Lucius's voice dropped. "Do not."

Voldemort smiled wider.

"Ah."

Lucius hated himself for reacting.

"You fear losing her."

Lucius said nothing.

"You fear she'll discover what her father really is." Voldemort laughed softly. "How touching."

Lucius stared into the flames. He thought of Dracena standing in this room from earlier. Terrified. Defiant. *I love you*. she said. She had said it after telling him he was wrong. Those two things could apparently coexist. Lucius still wasn't entirely sure how.

"Perhaps." he said.

Voldemort's smile disappeared.

"But if you intend to use that fear to control me, I suggest you think very carefully."

"Is that another threat?"

"No."

Lucius smiled faintly.

"Consider it financial advice, instead." Lucius faked a grin.

Voldemort stared at him. And then, he laughed. There was no warmth in it.

"Very well, Lucius."

Lucius did not relax.

"Dracena remains uninvolved."

"Yes."

"I will find another way to Potter."

"I assumed you would."

"But understand something."

Voldemort leaned toward the flames.

"This indulgence will not be forgotten."

Lucius looked directly into his eyes.

"I didn't expect it to be."

Voldemort's face disappeared. The fire returned to a bright, warm orange. Lucius still felt cold.

Dracena had found bread, cheese, some leftover Christmas ham, and a slice of cake that she was certain Mother had specifically told everyone not to touch because she was saving it. Dracena ate it anyway.

She stood alone in the kitchen in her dressing gown, eating stolen cake and grinning like an idiot.

Father had listened.

When Voldemort himself had told Lucius Malfoy to use his daughter? Father had said no.

Dracena returned upstairs feeling better than she had in days. Perhaps things were going to be all right.

She slept peacefully.

Lucius Malfoy's knees felt surprisingly unreliable.

He walked to the drinks cabinet and poured himself considerably more brandy than good judgment recommended. His hands were shaking. He stared at them.

"Bloody girl." he muttered. He drank. On the table beside him lay several rectangular plastic cases Dracena had left there several nights earlier.

She had called it a "DVD." Lucius picked it up. Two Muggle films. One about an Empire striking back. The other about some Jedi returning from wherever Jedi apparently went.

Lucius poured another drink.

He would never tell Dracena he'd acquired a Muggle television and watched them after she'd gone to bed. He certainly would never tell her he'd enjoyed them. He would take that fact to his grave before admitting that he'd understood the man in the black mask. A servant of enormous power. A loyal lieutenant. A man who had done monstrous things because he'd convinced himself there was no longer any meaningful difference between one compromise and the next. Until his master demanded one thing too many.

His son.

Lucius stared into the fire.

"Overwrought Muggle rubbish." He tried to convince himself. It wasn't working.

He took another drink. Then he looked toward the door. Somewhere upstairs, Dracena was probably writing to Potter.

Lucius grimaced.

He still disliked the boy. Intensely.

He disliked Granger.
He disliked airplanes.
He disliked the Moon, largely because he had recently learned Muggles had apparently been walking about on it without anyone in the Ministry bothering to mention this extraordinary breach of good sense.

He disliked nearly everything that had happened since his daughter had met Harry Potter.

But she was laughing again. He'd heard it yesterday. Really laughing. Lucius hadn't realized until then how long it had been.

He stared into his brandy. Perhaps Potter would break her heart. Perhaps she would eventually discover that the enormous gulf between their worlds could not be crossed merely because two teenagers desperately wished it could.

Perhaps Lucius would eventually have to pick up the pieces. If so, he would.

But they would be *her* pieces to break.
Her mistake to make.
Her life.

Lucius closed his eyes.

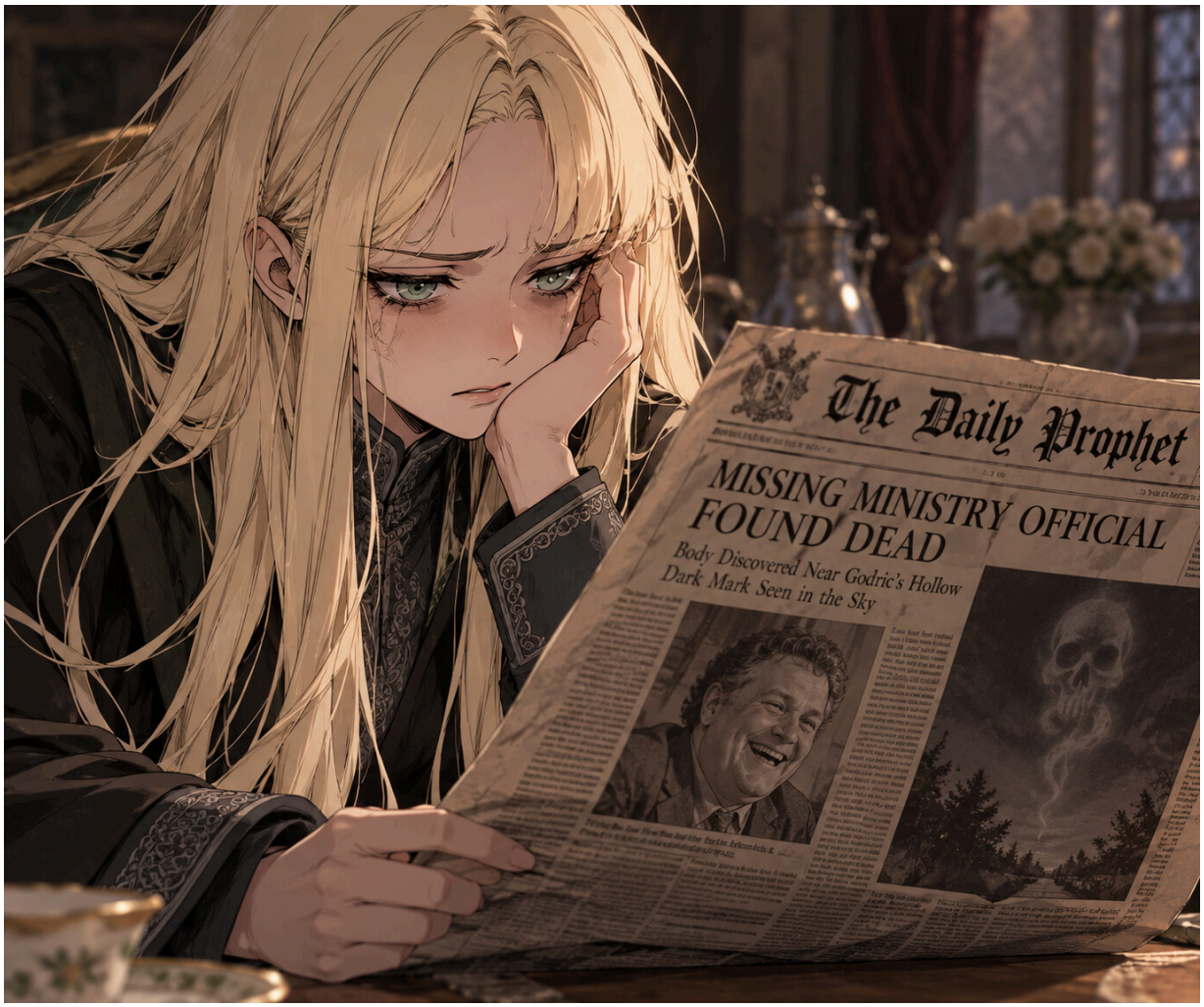
" *I belong to me*. " He could still hear her saying it. At the time, he'd thought it the most infuriating thing his daughter had ever said. Now Lucius understood something he had absolutely no intention of telling her.

She had been right.

He finished the brandy. He glanced at the Muggle film again.

"Still should have thrown the Emperor down the bloody hole sooner." Lucius muttered.

The Realization



The next morning ruined everything.

Narcissa was preparing breakfast when Dracena wandered into the dining room considerably later than was respectable.

"Good morning."

"Morning."

"Sleep well?"

"Eventually."

Dracena kissed her mother's cheek and sat.

The Daily Prophet lay folded beside Mother's tea. Dracena picked it up.

Politics.
Politics.
Some incomprehensible argument at the Ministry.
Politics.
Goblin banking financial outlooks.
Politics.
She turned several pages looking for something interesting.

There had been an ongoing scandal involving a famous Quidditch player, his wife, his wife's sister, and a bewitched wardrobe. Dracena had absolutely no idea what was happening anymore, which naturally meant she was desperate for the latest developments. She never found them. Halfway through the paper, a photograph caught her attention. She recognized the man, but wasn't sure where from.

MISSING MINISTRY OFFICIAL FOUND DEAD

Dracena frowned. She unfolded the paper. The photograph showed a round-faced wizard in his late forties or early fifties. He was smiling. His picture moved, and he laughed. Dracena knew that smile. That laugh.

Not well, but she knew it.

She read the story below the photograph.

> ***Edwin Pritchard** , Deputy Director in the Ministry's Office of Muggle Liaisons, had been missing for six days before his body was discovered shortly before midnight outside Gimbel's Meadow.*

The article went on to describe him as an advocate for "expanded cooperative relations between magical and non-magical communities" and a supporter of reforms intended to reduce unnecessary restrictions on contact between the two populations.

Dracena skimmed. Then stopped. Pritchard. Of course. His son had been a Hufflepuff.

Tommy Pritchard. He'd graduated last year. Dracena hadn't really known him well. Everyone had remembered Tommy. He was one of those irritating people who seemed capable of talking to absolutely anyone.

Dracena remembered his father coming to Hogwarts for some school event. Tommy had been mortified because his father had arrived wearing an enormous yellow-and-black scarf. Not a Hufflepuff scarf. An actual badger. Or something charmed to look like one. Dracena remembered Mr. Pritchard walking through the entrance hall while the thing's head moved around his neck. Tommy's face had turned bright red. "Father, take it off."

"But I'm supporting your House!"

"You're humiliating me!"

"That's also a father's responsibility."

Even Dracena had laughed. She remembered Mr. Pritchard laughing too. Even Tommy laughed, while red from embarrassment.

His father had one of those laughs that made everyone around him laugh harder. She looked at the photograph again. He was laughing, but Dracena didn't feel the mirth.

The Prophet had included another photograph beneath the first. The night sky. Trees. And hanging above them? A skull, with a serpent emerging from its mouth.

The Dark Mark. Dracena stopped reading.

"Mother?"

"Hm?" Narcissa was buttering toast.

"Did you know Edwin Pritchard?" The knife stopped briefly.

"Yes."

"Did you know him well?"

"No." Mother resumed buttering. "Your father knew him better."

Dracena looked down at the paper.

Your father knew him better.

Last night came back all at once.

Green fire.
My Lord.
Dracena's breakfast suddenly didn't look very appealing.

"Was he a bad person?" Dracena asked.

Mother looked at her sideways. "Edwin? No."

Dracena looked back at his photograph. He was laughing again.

"Then why would somebody kill him?"

Narcissa's face changed.

"Dracena."

"What?"

"This is not appropriate breakfast conversation."

That was an extremely "Narcissa Malfoy" answer. Normally Dracena would have accepted it. Today she couldn't.

She folded the Prophet and put it under her arm.

"Dracena..."

"I'm going outside."

"You haven't eaten."

"I'm not hungry."

She carried the newspaper with her. Dracena walked the grounds without any particular destination. The winter air hurt her face.

Good. She needed that.

Mr. Pritchard's photograph kept smiling and laughing at her from beneath her arm.

Father knew him. Father worked for Voldemort. Death Eaters had killed him.

Those were three facts. They were not necessarily connected. Dracena knew that. Hermione would insist upon that distinction.

Correlation is not causation. Dracena had heard that phrase enough times to want to strangle her with it. Father might have had nothing whatsoever to do with Edwin Pritchard's death. He might not even have known it was going to happen. There were lots of Death Eaters.

But Father was important. Powerful. Connected. Voldemort spoke to him directly.

My Lord.

Her father wasn't merely some idiot on the edge of the organization. What if he'd known? What if he'd given Voldemort Pritchard's name?

What if...

Dracena stopped walking. What if Father had him killed?

"No." She said it aloud. A crow somewhere in the trees objected. "No." She couldn't believe that. She **wouldn't** .

She accidentally dropped the newspaper. The Prophet had fallen open to the photograph of the Dark Mark.

She remembered Tommy Pritchard.

Father, take it off.
But I'm supporting your House!
You're humiliating me!
That's also a father's responsibility.

That stupid moving badger. Dracena could still hear the man's laugh.

Tommy didn't have a father anymore. Someone had taken him away. And last night Dracena had gone to bed happy because **her** father had protected **her** .

The thought suddenly made her feel ashamed. Father had stood up to Voldemort. For her. That mattered.

But... Why only her?

Dracena stared at the Dark Mark. Why hadn't someone stood up for Edwin Pritchard? Who stood up for the next person? And the next? How many people had Father's money helped hurt? How many doors had Father's name opened? How many people had died while powerful families told their children that these were " *complicated times* ?"

Dracena felt sick. She wished Potter were here. The realization annoyed her immediately. Potter would know what to do.

No. That wasn't true. Potter would know that **something had to be done.** Those were very different things. She could practically hear him.

"*We have to do something!*" Then he would grab his wand, run directly toward whatever appeared most dangerous, and trust that courage, luck and Hermione's genius would somehow keep him alive.

Dracena loved Harry. She really did. He was also a bit of an idiot sometimes. A brave idiot, but an idiot.

She smiled despite herself. Harry was brave. Braver than anyone she knew. Dracena had once thought bravery meant not being frightened. Harry had disabused her of that. She had seen him frightened. She had watched him do things anyway. Hermione too. Even Longbottom, damn him. There was something admirable in that. Something Dracena didn't naturally possess.

She was frightened now. More frightened than she could remember being. Her father was involved with Voldemort. Perhaps deeply. People were dying.

Voldemort wanted Harry dead. And Voldemort knew Dracena's name. Every sensible instinct told her to return to the house, burn the newspaper, write Potter a letter, and allow someone older and more qualified to deal with it.

Harry wouldn't. Harry would say: " *We have to do something*." Dracena stared at the Dark Mark again. "Fine, Potter."

Her voice trembled. "Something..." Running toward Voldemort with her wand drawn would accomplish exactly one thing: there would be a considerably shorter obituary in tomorrow's Prophet.

Dracena Malfoy was not a Gryffindor. She was a Slytherin.

She didn't charge. She wasn't brave. Not naturally, anyway. She was cunning.

She thought about what she remembered Voldemort had said.

Your daughter is uniquely positioned...

Dracena's eyes moved back to the photograph of the Dark Mark.

"...Uniquely positioned..."

She hated those words, but he wasn't wrong.

She was Lucius Malfoy's daughter. People trusted her name. The wrong people, perhaps, but they trusted it. She had grown up around families other people feared. She knew their children. Their houses. Their manners. And their manors. Their assumptions.

She knew how they spoke when outsiders weren't listening. And Voldemort already knew who she was.

More than that... He already wanted her involved.

Dracena became very still. A thought had appeared. A horrible thought. An absurd thought. The sort of thought Potter would have immediately announced to Hermione, at which point Hermione would explain seventeen reasons it was impossible.

Dracena didn't announce it. She examined it. Turned it around in her head. She looked for weaknesses. There were many. She iterated on her plan. One particular weakness was that it might get her killed. That seemed significant.

Dracena stared at the image of the skull and serpent. Her hands were shaking. She folded them together until they stopped. Harry could be brave. That didn't mean she had to be stupid. Perhaps there was a way. Perhaps courage didn't always mean charging toward the monster.

Perhaps sometimes...

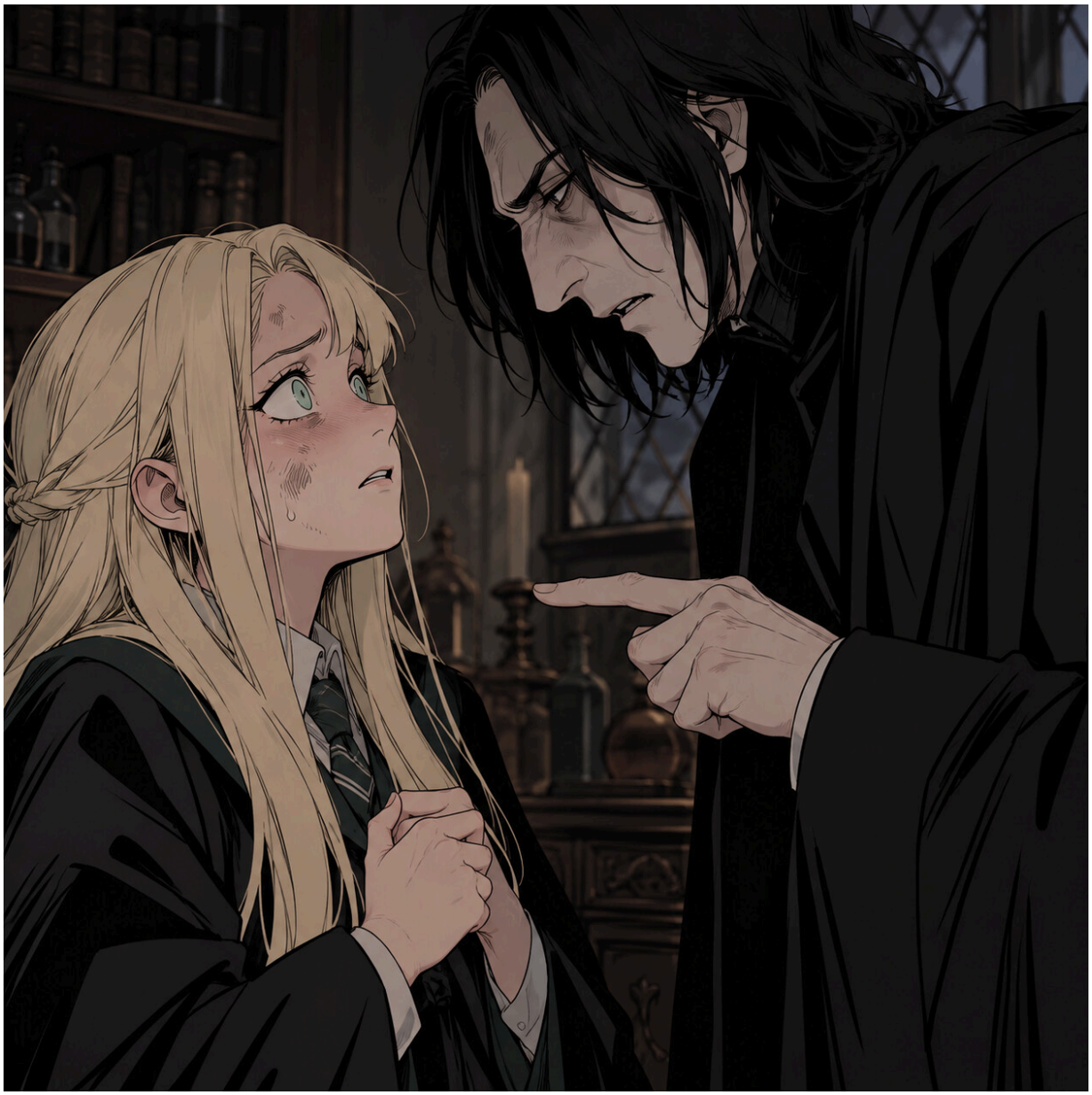
Dracena looked toward Malfoy Manor. Toward the window to her father's study, Then back at the Dark Mark.

She thought for a very long time, and then Dracena Malfoy smiled.

Fear, she was beginning to understand, did not necessarily mean no. She remembered something Harry had told her a while ago. Sometimes being scared tells you something matters.

Her smile broadened. Voldemort had made a rather interesting mistake. He had told Lucius Malfoy exactly how useful his daughter could be.

The Plan



Hogwarts was wrong when it was empty. Dracena had never noticed that before. There were always footsteps somewhere. Students shouting across corridors, suits of armour complaining about being bumped, Peeves doing something that would eventually require a mop, and portraits gossiping about everyone who passed.

Now there was only the sound of Dracena's shoes against stone.

Some Christmas decorations still hung in the Great Hall. Filch was taking them down, slowly. The enchanted ceiling was pale and grey, threatening snow. A handful of staff had already returned, along with a few students who had remained over the holiday, but the castle otherwise felt abandoned.

Dracena had told her mother she wanted to return early to prepare for term. Narcissa had stared at her for several seconds. "Of course." she finally said. Dracena suspected her mother knew perfectly well that her daughter had never voluntarily returned to school early in order to *prepare for term* in her life. Fortunately, Mother had not asked for any details.

Dracena's trunk was upstairs. Dracena was not. She stood outside Professor Snape's office. She had been standing there for almost ten minutes. This was becoming embarrassing.

She raised her hand.
Stopped.
Lowered it. "This is ridiculous." she said to herself.

The door opened suddenly. Professor Snape stood on the other side. Dracena nearly jumped out of her skin. He looked at her. She looked at him.

"Miss Malfoy." he said, in his monotone voice.

"Professor."

"Have you developed an objection to doors?"

"No."

"Then either enter, or cease haunting mine."

He turned away and went inside his office. Dracena quickly followed, and gently closed the door behind her.

Snape's office smelled exactly as unpleasant as she remembered: old stone, dried ingredients, things suspended in jars that Dracena strongly suspected had once possessed opinions.

Snape returned to his desk. There was a stack of essays before him. He picked up his quill. "Term begins tomorrow." he said, in his icy monotone voice.

"I know."

"Your presence suggests otherwise."

"I came back early."

"So I had gathered." He made a mark on an essay. Dracena waited. Snape did not look up. She suddenly understood why Potter found him so infuriating.

"I need to speak to you." She said, voice shaking.

"I had assumed you did not travel halfway across Britain for the pleasure of watching me mark essays."

"It's important."

"Everything is important at sixteen."

Dracena bristled. Snape finally looked up. His eyes moved over her face.

The sarcasm receded. Just a bit.

"Sit."

Dracena sat. Snape put down his quill.

"Has Potter done something?"

"What?"

"Potter. Has he..."

"No."

"Miss Granger?"

"No."

"Your father?"

Dracena hesitated. Snape noticed. Of course he did. Snape noticed everything. Another infuriating thing about him.

"Ah."

"It's not what you think."

"I assure you, Miss Malfoy, I have made no attempt to imagine the domestic affairs of your family."

Dracena took a breath. "I need to know how someone becomes a Death Eater."

Snape stared at her. "Get out." Snape said, angrily.

Dracena blinked. "What?"

"You heard me." His icy monotone voice grew angrier.

"But..."

"Whatever adolescent melodrama has inspired this astonishing display of stupidity, I have neither the time nor inclination to participate in it."

"It isn't.."

"Out!" Professor Snape shouted, a bit louder this time. She heard more emotion from his voice than she ever noticed before.

"I heard my father talking to Voldemort."

Snape stopped. Dracena had never seen anyone become so completely still.

"Sit down."

"I am sitting."

"Then continue to do so."

The icy, cold monotone returned to his voice.

"When?"

"Three nights ago."

"Where?"

"At home. Father's study. Through the Floo."

"You saw him?"

"A little. I peeked under the door."

"You heard him?"

"Yes."

"What precisely did you hear?"

Dracena swallowed. "He wanted Father to use me."

Snape's face revealed nothing. "To do what?"

"Kill Harry."

"Continue." Snape said, coldly.

"He said Harry trusted me. That I could give him something. A potion, I think. Father refused."

Snape leaned back.

"He refused?" Snape asked, surprised.

Dracena couldn't keep the pride from her voice. "Yes."

"Your father told the Dark Lord 'no?'"

"Several times."

Snape's eyebrows rose slightly.

"He said I wasn't a Death Eater."

"An accurate observation. Now, unfortunately, it seems your father appears to have developed an unexpected enthusiasm for suicide."

Despite herself, Dracena laughed. It came out strangely. She hadn't realized how frightened she was until that moment. Snape didn't laugh.

"What happened then?"

"Voldemort kept pushing. He said I was uniquely positioned. That Harry trusted me. Father told him I hadn't sworn anything to him. Voldemort called me a resource." Her mouth tightened. "Father said I wasn't one."

Something unreadable flickered in Snape's expression.

"And?"

"He told Voldemort if he wanted Harry dead, he could kill him himself. Or find someone else. But he was to leave me out of it."

"And the Dark Lord agreed?"

"Eventually."

"No."

Dracena frowned. "He did."

"The Dark Lord does not agree to abandon useful ideas, Miss Malfoy. He finds other methods." The warmth she'd carried since overhearing her father suddenly felt much smaller. "Your father bought you time."

Dracena looked at the floor. "I thought that might be the case."

"And therefore you've decided to reward his efforts by doing precisely what he risked his life to prevent."

"No." Dracena said, quietly.

"You've travelled here a day early to ask a former Death Eater how to become a Death Eater."

"That's not what I mean."

"It is precisely what you mean."

"No. I want him to think I've become one."

Snape's eyes narrowed. She had his attention now. Dracena leaned forward.

"He already wants me in his circle."

"Yes."

"He already thinks I'm useful."

"Yes."

"He thinks Father is preventing me from being useful."

"Apparently."

"So let him."

Snape looked at Dracena, but said nothing.

"Let him think Father was wrong. Let him think Potter confused me. Let him think Hermione filled my head with Muggle nonsense. I went home, remembered who I was, remembered I'm a Malfoy, and decided I'd had enough."

"That sounds remarkably like several things you've actually believed."

Dracena flinched.

"I know."

"Good."

She hadn't expected that. Snape folded his hands.

"Continue."

Dracena gathered herself.

"I tell Voldemort I want to prove myself."

"By doing what?"

"Whatever makes sense."

"An inspiring, detailed plan."

"I haven't got that far!"

"Clearly."

"That's why I'm here!"

Snape's eyes narrowed. Dracena forced herself to lower her voice.

"I don't know how this works."

"Obviously."

"You do."

Snape said nothing, his face inscrutable.

"I know you were one of them."

"Many people know that."

"Dumbledore trusts you."

"Many people question his judgment."

"I don't."

That seemed to surprise Snape.

"I don't know what you did. I don't know why Dumbledore trusts you. And I'm not asking."

"How generous of you, Miss Malfoy."

"But if there's a way to get close enough to Voldemort to hear things without actually belonging to him..."

"You are making assumptions about matters far beyond your understanding."

"Probably."

That stopped him. Dracena swallowed.

"That's why I'm asking you."

Snape studied her. "Suppose I tell you no."

"I'll go back to my dormitory."

"And?"

"I don't know."

"An unsatisfactory answer."

"It's a truthful one."

Snape watched her. "What exactly do you imagine accomplishing?"

"I don't know that either."

Snape sighed. "Then this conversation has been enormously productive." Snape said, icy sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"I could hear things."

"Things." Snape said, sarcastically.

"Names. Plans. People they're targeting. Where they're going. What they're doing. I don't know."

"And then?"

"I tell someone."

"Whom do you think would listen to a Death Eater?"

Dracena looked at him. Snape's expression changed almost imperceptibly.

"Oh, no."

"What?"

"You imagine *I* would be this someone."

Dracena suddenly felt much less clever.

"Well..."

"Extraordinary."

"You know what you're doing!"

"And you demonstrably do not."

"Then teach me."

"No."

"Professor..."

"No." Snape said, sharply.

Dracena stood.

"You haven't even heard me out."

"I have heard more than enough. You are sixteen years old. You overheard one conversation which frightened you, discovered that the Dark Lord wishes to exploit your relationship with Potter, and have responded by concocting a fantasy in which you infiltrate his organization and report his plans to me."

"It's not a fantasy."

"It is considerably worse. Fantasies are generally somewhat believable."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

Snape stood. "The people you are discussing torture children, Miss Malfoy."

Dracena's anger vanished, replaced by terror.

"They murder families. They make people disappear. They will kill you if they suspect you. They may kill you merely to determine whether someone else is loyal. Like your Father. They may do the same to him, to test your loyalty. Or your mother."

Dracena said nothing.

"You appear to imagine becoming a Death Eater involves attending sinister meetings, nodding gravely while villains discuss their plans, then slipping away afterward to send Potter a helpful owl."

"I don't..."

"Do you know what the Dark Lord does to people who lie to him?"

"No."

"I do."

The words landed like a bird hitting a window. Dracena looked at him. For the first time, she understood that Snape wasn't trying to frighten her.

Or rather? He was. But he also wasn't exaggerating.

"Sit down."

Dracena sat. Snape remained standing.

"If we continue this conversation... And I have not agreed that we shall... You will first abandon several childish assumptions."

"All right." Dracena said.

"First: Potter cannot know."

Dracena nodded.

"I assumed..."

"No. You haven't."

His voice sharpened.

"You think you understand that sentence. You do not."

Dracena went still.

"If Potter knows, Potter must lie."

"He can."

Snape actually looked offended.

"Potter?"

Dracena nearly smiled.

"He's not *that* bad of a liar."

"He is a catastrophically poor liar when emotionally invested."

"He's gotten better."

"Yes. Largely because you've spent time informing him when he's being an idiot."

That almost made her smile again. Snape didn't let her.

"If Potter knows, every glance becomes a performance. Every argument becomes a performance. Every moment the two of you occupy the same room becomes an opportunity for someone to notice that Harry Potter does not behave like a young man betrayed by the girl he loves."

Dracena's smile vanished.

"He has to believe it."

"Yes."

"Completely?"

"Completely."

Dracena looked down.

"No messages." Snape continued. "No hidden notes. No coded assurances. No secret meetings. No touching his hand beneath a table when nobody appears to be watching. No clever little phrase only the two of you understand."

Dracena's throat tightened.

"Nothing?" Dracena repeated.

"Nothing." Snape said, coldly.

"But if.."

" **Nothing** ." Snape said, sharply.

Snape leaned toward her.

"Potter must not *act* heartbroken, Miss Malfoy."

She looked up.

"He must **be** heartbroken."

That hurt. Snape saw it. He continued anyway.

"The Dark Lord will not merely watch you. He will watch Potter. Others will watch Potter. And Harry Potter, for all his many faults, wears most of his emotions on his shirtsleeves with the subtlety of a Gryffindor banner."

Dracena whispered, "I know."

"No. I don't believe you do."

"I said I know."

"You will have to make him hate you."

Dracena flinched.

"Maybe. Not..."

"Yes."

"He doesn't have to hate me."

"He has to despise you."

"No." Dracena whimpered.

"He must believe you a coward."

Her eyes burned.

"Stop." she pleaded, forcing the tears back.

"He must believe you used him."

"Professor, I know!" She said, wiping a tear from her face.

"Believe every conversation in which you questioned your family's beliefs was a temporary adolescent rebellion."

"Stop." She said, a hair's breadth from tears.

"Believe you chose your name, your status and your father over him."

She held back the tears with nearly superhuman strength.

"Believe that when you told him you loved him..."

" **Enough!** " She screamed. Her voice echoed through the dungeon.

Snape stopped.

Dracena was breathing hard. Her eyes were wet.

Snape's expression remained infuriatingly calm.

"That." he said quietly, "is what you are proposing."

Dracena wiped her face angrily. "You're being cruel."

"Yes. If cruelty in this room prevents you from discovering the reality of your proposal while standing before the Dark Lord, I will consider it time well spent."

Dracena hated him. For perhaps thirty seconds, she genuinely hated him. Then she realized something worse. He was right. She took a deep breath, and gathered herself. She put on the "Malfoy face" she wore when she wanted to lock the world behind a door.

"Enough." She said, with a calmness she didn't feel.

"Granger cannot know either."

Dracena shut her eyes.

"Hermione..."

"No."

" **She** can lie."

"Better than Potter."

"Much better."

"Which is irrelevant."

Dracena opened her eyes. "Why?"

"Because Miss Granger will attempt to help you."

"That's one of her better qualities."

"Not here." Snape returned to his chair. "She will research. She will plan. She will worry. She will watch you. She will watch Potter watching you. She will attempt to anticipate problems. Eventually she will do something intelligent."

Dracena frowned.

"That sounds useful."

"Which is precisely what will make it dangerous."

Dracena understood.

"And Dumbledore?"

"No."

She stared at him.

"Dumbledore has to know."

"He does not."

"You're serious?"

"Entirely."

"But you trust him."

Snape's expression became unreadable. "With my life."

"Then why..."

"Because the Headmaster is one of the most perceptive men the Dark Lord knows."

Dracena waited.

"And if Albus Dumbledore believes Lucius Malfoy's daughter has finally embraced her father's cause, the Dark Lord will find that fact extremely persuasive."

Dracena felt sick.

"And I have to let him think...?"

"Yes."

Dracena stared at Snape.

"Who knows, then?"

"If this were to be done?"

"Yes."

"Me."

"And?"

"No one else."

Dracena blinked.

"No one?"

"No one."

"What if something happens to you?"

"Then you have discovered one of the many reasons this is a terrible idea."

She stared at him.

"That's insane."

"At last, we agree."

Dracena stood again and began pacing.

"This isn't what I thought."

"You thought?"

"I thought..."

"I know what you thought."

"No, you don't."

"I assure you..."

"I thought I'd lose Harry."

Snape stopped.

Dracena turned toward him.

"I knew that."

Her voice shook.

"I knew if I did this, Harry and I couldn't stay together. Voldemort wants me because Harry loves me. That's the whole point. If I'm still with Harry, the first thing Voldemort will do is ask me to use him. To hurt him."

Snape said nothing.

"So I knew."

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"And your solution?"

"I leave him."

"Potter will not believe you."

"I'll make him."

"How?"

Dracena didn't answer.

Snape waited.

"He knows you." Snape said.

"I know."

"He knows how you speak when you're angry. He knows how you behave when you're frightened. He knows when you're lying badly."

"I know."

"He will ask questions."

"I know."

"He will follow you."

"I know."

"He will probably conclude that your father has threatened you."

"I know."

"He may decide to confront Lucius."

"Oh, Merlin."

"Quite."

Dracena sank back into the chair. Snape watched her.

"You have promised Potter things, I assume."

Dracena looked at him sharply. "That is none of your business."

"Then I shall take that as confirmation."

She looked away. " *We don't lie about not knowing*." *s* he remembered him saying. Harry had promised her that. So had she.

Snape's voice came quietly. "Can you do it?"

Dracena didn't answer.

"Can you look at Harry Potter and convince him that whatever exists between you is finished?"

She heard Harry's voice, again in her head.

"*And if we can't?*"

"*Dracena, don't*."

"*Seriously. If we can't?*"

Then another memory.

"*You can't say it*."

"*I want to*."

"*That's not what I asked*."

"*I know.*"

And then she remembered:

"*We don't lie about not knowing*."

Dracena swallowed.

"I don't know."

Snape's mouth tightened.

"'I don't know' is not sufficient."

"It has to be."

"No."

"It **has to be.** " Dracena said, sharply.

Snape went silent. Dracena looked at him through wet eyes.

"I love Harry." Her voice broke. She didn't care. "I really, truly love him."

Snape looked away.

"And it's because I love him that I have to be willing to do this." She wiped her face. "For him. And more importantly, for me."

Snape's eyes returned to her.

Dracena continued before she lost her nerve. "This isn't just about Harry."

"Then what is it about?" Snape asked.

"I don't know how to explain it."

"You should really try, Miss Malfoy. It's your best hope to convince me."

Dracena stared at her hands. "I read about Edwin Pritchard."

Snape knew the name. She could tell.

"He was found dead."

"Yes."

"Death Mark over the body."

"Dark Mark."

"Yeah, that. Whatever."

She rubbed her palms against her robes. "I knew his son. Not well. He was a Hufflepuff. Graduated last year."

Snape listened.

"His father came to Hogwarts once wearing this ridiculous badger scarf. It moved. Like some kind of silly badger."

Snape continued listening.

"He was funny."

"I remember Mr. Pritchard."

"You do?"

"I taught his son for seven years."

"Oh."

Dracena looked down. "Father knew him."

Snape continued to listen, saying nothing.

"I don't know if Father had anything to do with what happened. I don't want you to tell me."

"Why?" Snape said, genuinely curious.

"Because I'm not asking you to make this easy."

Snape studied her.

"I don't know what my father has done."

She spoke slowly now.

"I know he's involved. I know he's involved more deeply than I wanted to believe. I know he gives Voldemort money. Contacts. Influence."

She looked down at her hands, thinking intently.

"I know he protected me." Her voice softened. "He stood up to him for me."

Snape said nothing, watching and listening.

"I'm proud of him for that." Her eyes filled again. "And I'm furious with him." She hadn't intended to say that, but once it was out, more followed. "Because if he can stand there and tell Voldemort no for me, then he knows how to say no."

Snape remained perfectly still.

"So why doesn't he?" Her voice cracked. "For everybody else?"

A single tear fell down her cheek.

"I don't understand." She shook her head. "Maybe there are things I don't know. There probably are. Maybe Father thinks he's protecting us. Maybe he thinks Voldemort is necessary. Maybe he thinks whatever they're doing is worth it. Maybe he's trapped. Maybe he's frightened." She laughed bitterly. "Maybe I'm still making excuses for him."

Snape didn't rescue her from that thought. Dracena was grateful.

"I don't know."

Again. Those three words, but Harry had taught her something about them. Sometimes *I don't know* was the most honest thing a person could say.

"What I do know is that people are dying."

Snape's face remained unreadable.

"And I know it's wrong." Dracena looked directly at him. "And if I can do something that helps stop it, I think I have to."

"You think."

"I do."

"Those are different statements."

"Fine." She breathed. "I have to." she said, with a bravery she didn't quite feel.

Snape leaned back. "You will lose Potter."

"I know."

"You may lose your father."

Dracena's face tightened. "I know."

"Your mother."

"I know."

"Your home."

"I know."

"Your inheritance."

"I know."

"Your name."

That one hurt unexpectedly. Dracena looked at him. "My name is mine."

Snape's eyes sharpened. She hadn't meant it defiantly, but suddenly she heard herself saying it to her father.

"*I belong to me*."

"My name is mine." she repeated. "Even if my family decides otherwise."

Snape said nothing.

Dracena's hands were trembling again. "I could lose everything."

"Yes."

"I could die."

"Yes."

"I'm frightened."

"Good."

Dracena stared at him.

"Good?"

"Only fools are not frightened."

"I'm terrified."

"Better."

"You're awful at comforting people."

"It is a skill I have lacked after many years at Hogwarts."

Despite everything, Dracena laughed. It lasted only a second. Then she looked down at her hands.

"I'm going to be a mess."

Snape didn't contradict her.

"I know that." Her voice became very quiet. "If I do this, I'm going to hurt Harry. I'm going to hurt Hermione. Dumbledore will think I'm horrible. My father might think he's won, which somehow makes this even worse." She swallowed. "And I'm going to hate myself sometimes."

Snape watched her.

"But if I don't do anything..." She stopped. That possibility frightened her differently. "If I go back to school tomorrow and pretend I never heard that conversation, and somebody else ends up like Mr. Pritchard..." She looked up at Snape, pleading "I'll always wonder."

Snape said nothing.

"For the rest of my life, I'll wonder whether there was something I could have done." Her eyes met his. "I think that would make a bigger mess of me."

For the first time since she'd entered the office, Severus Snape looked at Dracena Malfoy without sarcasm, irritation or contempt. He simply looked at her, for an uncomfortably long time.

"You are not ready."

Dracena's heart sank. "But..." Dracena began

I did not say no." Snape said, a touch of warmth in his voice he never heard before.

She stopped. Snape rose. "You came here with an idea." He walked around the desk. "A dangerous idea. Poorly conceived, sentimentally motivated, strategically incomplete and based upon an almost insulting ignorance of the organization you propose to infiltrate." The ice returned to Snape's voice

Dracena glared at him. "Thank you."

"You are welcome."

He stopped in front of her. "But not **entirely** without merit."

Dracena stared. "Really?"

"Do not look so pleased. It is unbecoming."

She immediately stopped looking pleased.

"The Dark Lord already wants you involved. That matters."

Dracena nodded.

"Your father has explicitly denied him access to you. That matters more."

She hadn't considered that. "Why?"

"Because things being forbidden makes things more valuable."

"Oh."

"You are Lucius Malfoy's daughter. You are a Slytherin. You are connected to families the Dark Lord wishes to control. You have been publicly close to Potter and Granger. And, if presented correctly, your apparent repudiation of them could be interpreted as evidence of commitment."

Dracena listened.

"But the greatest obstacle remains Potter."

"I know."

"No, I still don't think you do."

Snape stepped closer.

"Understand this now." His voice was very quiet. "If you proceed, Harry Potter is not your accomplice."

Dracena held his gaze.

"He is not your confidant."

Her throat tightened.

"He is not your secret lover."

She said nothing.

"He is not waiting for you at the end of this."

That one landed. Dracena's eyes burned.

"You do not know what he will be." Snape said.

"No." Dracena whispered "Neither do you."

Snape's expression was merciless. "You will not permit yourself to imagine that Potter owes you forgiveness because you did this partly for him."

"I wouldn't."

"You will."

Dracena started to object. Snape cut her off.

"You will imagine the explanation. You will imagine his face when he learns the truth. You will imagine him understanding. You will imagine everything returning to what it was."

Dracena couldn't look at him anymore.

"You will use that fantasy to comfort yourself." He paused. "And if you do, it will make you weak."

A tear slipped down Dracena's cheek. She wiped it away.

"So what am I supposed to believe?"

"The truth."

She looked up.

Snape's face had changed. Only slightly. Suddenly Dracena wondered how much of this conversation was actually about her.

"You do not know whether Harry Potter will forgive you."

There it was again. "*I don't know.*"

"You do not know whether he will still love you."

Her chest hurt.

"You do not know whether your father will survive this war. You do not know whether your mother will forgive you. You do not know what Dumbledore will think of you when this is finished."

Snape's voice became quieter.

"You control **none** of those things."

Dracena stared at him.

"You control Dracena Malfoy."

Something inside her shifted.

"Nothing else."

Dracena breathed. Once. Twice. Then she nodded.

Snape returned to his desk and sat, picked up his quill and returned to marking essays.

Dracena stared at him.

"That's it?"

"For today."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Go to your dormitory."

"And?"

"You need to think."

"Professor Snape..."

His quill scratched across parchment.

"Think."

"I've been thinking."

"Then attempt it competently."

Dracena stood. She made it halfway to the door.

"Miss Malfoy."

She stopped. Snape still wasn't looking at her.

"Tell no one about this conversation."

Dracena swallowed.

"Not Harry. Not Hermione. Not Dumbledore."

Dracena nodded as she reached for the door.

"And Miss Malfoy?"

She turned. Snape's expression was unreadable again.

"Return tonight at eleven and tell me if you've changed your mind. If so, I will think no less of you."

Dracena blinked. That might have been the kindest thing Severus Snape had said to her in six years, which was depressing.

"And if I haven't?"

Snape regarded her for a long moment.

"Then we begin by teaching you how to lie. I will try and teach you to become a proper spy in the limited amount of time we have."

Dracena's hand tightened around the door handle.

"I already know how to lie."

Snape's mouth twitched. It wasn't a smile. It was worse. "No, Miss Malfoy."

He lowered his eyes to the essay.

"You know how to lie to your father." The quill scratched across the parchment. "Tomorrow, we discover whether you can lie to Harry Potter. And then, you'll become a Death Eater."

The Return



The Hogwarts Express, and the rest of the Hogwarts students had arrived the previous evening. She had said "hi" to her friends when they arrived. Pansy complained about her Christmas presents, while the other girls discussed their holidays.

She had thought about Harry. She had thought about him rather a lot.

This was a big problem.

Harry had sent two owls over Christmas. She had answered the first. The second was still folded inside her trunk, tucked beneath a stack of winter robes where she wouldn't have to look at it.

She knew its contents by heart. It wasn't a particularly remarkable letter. Harry had written about his aunt and uncle, about Christmas dinner and a disastrous attempt to help his aunt Petuna in the kitchen. He'd asked whether she was enjoying herself at home.

And he'd written that he missed her.

I wish you were here. Harry had written.

Five words. Five perfectly ordinary words that had made her cry so hard she'd been unable to finish reading the letter.

She'd read it another eleven times since. Now she was back at Hogwarts, and she had a problem. Harry Potter was somewhere in this castle. Sooner or later, he was going to find her.

She was crossing the entrance hall the following afternoon when she heard him.

"Dracena!"

Her heart leapt. For one glorious, treacherous instant, she wanted nothing more than to turn around, run to him, and throw her arms around his neck. Instead, she stopped walking. She took a breath. Another.

You control Dracena Malfoy.

She turned. "Potter."

Harry was approaching with that ridiculous, untidy hair and that equally ridiculous smile. He looked happy to see her. That was going to make this difficult.

"Hi!"

"Hello."

He slowed. Something in her expression must have warned him.

"Everything all right?"

"Of course."

"Oh. Good."

He smiled again, although not quite as broadly.

"I was looking for you last night."

"How flattering."

Harry blinked.

Dracena adjusted the strap of her schoolbag. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Well, I just..." He hesitated. "I wanted to see you."

She looked at him. Her insides already hurt

"I see."

Harry shifted his weight.

"Did you get my owl?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

He waited. She said nothing.

"Well, I was wondering why you didn't answer."

Dracena sighed. "I was busy, Potter."

Harry blinked. "Busy?"

"Yes. Busy. I had things to do, you know."

"I know, I just..."

"I can't spend my entire holiday sitting beside a window waiting for your letters."

Harry's smile disappeared. Dracena felt it happen. It was almost physical, like watching someone slam a door.

"Oh." He looked down. "Sorry."

There it was. One small word. *Sorry*. She had made Harry Potter apologize for missing her. Something inside her twisted.

"Honestly, Potter." she continued, "you're becoming rather obsessed."

Harry looked up. "What?"

"Following me about. Sending letters. Demanding explanations when I don't answer them."

"I wasn't demanding..."

"It's unbecoming."

He stared at her.

Dracena raised an eyebrow. "Surely you have other things to occupy your time."

Harry's face reddened. "Yeah." He swallowed. "Yeah, of course."

She waited. He looked as though he wanted to say something else. For a moment, she was terrified he would, then he nodded.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you." He turned away.

Dracena watched him go. He didn't look back.

She stood in the entrance hall until he disappeared around the corner. Only then did she realize she had been holding her breath. She let it out slowly.

Well done, she thought. *Very convincing*. She hated herself.

Professor Snape's office smelled of dried herbs, old parchment, and something faintly medicinal. Dracena had never particularly liked the smell. Tonight was different. She somehow found it comforting. It was familiar. Predictable. Nothing in this room was likely to ask her why she hadn't answered an owl. She wasn't going to have to break anyone's heart in here.

Snape sat behind his desk, reading a piece of parchment. Dracena stood before him. He had been silent for nearly a minute.

Finally, he looked up. "Again."

Dracena closed her eyes. "Professor..."

"Again, Miss Malfoy."

She opened her eyes.

He watched her.

She straightened. Her shoulders settled. Her chin lifted. The expression she wore was one she'd practiced since childhood.

"*The Malfoy face*."

Her father wore it when dealing with people he considered beneath him. Her mother wore a gentler variation when entertaining guests she privately despised. Dracena had learned it before she'd learned long division.

Snape studied her. "Better."

She said nothing.

"Your difficulty." he continued, "is not that you will not lie."

Dracena looked at him.

"You are an accomplished liar, Miss Malfoy. I suspect you have been lying to your father about your academic pursuits for years."

"I have excellent marks."

"Yes. Which makes your dishonesty all the more irritating."

She almost smiled. Almost.

Snape leaned back. "Your difficulty is that you wish to be understood."

Dracena's smile vanished.

"You wish Potter to recognize that you are concealing something. You wish him to see through your performance."

"That's not true."

Snape raised an eyebrow. She looked away.

"Isn't it?"

Snape set down the parchment. "Miss Malfoy, you must understand something. Potter cannot suspect that you are acting."

"I know."

"No. I do not believe you do." His voice remained quiet. "Potter must believe that the young woman he thought he knew was a fabrication."

Dracena stared at the floor.

"He must believe that everything you told him was a lie."

She swallowed. "Professor..."

"And you must allow him to believe it."

Her eyes stung. She blinked rapidly.

Snape watched her. "You have spent sixteen years learning to conceal your feelings. Your mother and father have taught you to smile at people you dislike, flatter people you despise, and conceal your opinions when expressing them would be inconvenient."

Dracena looked up. "Yes, sir."

"Then I suggest you put that education to use."

She nodded.

Snape studied her for another moment. "How did your conversation with Potter go?"

Dracena's stomach tightened. "Well."

"Explain."

"I told him I was busy over Christmas."

"And?"

"That I couldn't be expected to answer every letter."

Snape waited.

Dracena looked down.

"I told him he was becoming obsessed."

Something changed in Snape's expression. Not much, but enough.

"And how did he respond?"

"He apologized."

Snape was silent.

Dracena stared at her hands. "He apologized." she repeated.

Her voice cracked. She hated that. She hated it more than anything.

Snape rose. He walked toward the shelves behind his desk, examining the contents as though searching for something.

When he spoke again, his voice was quieter.

"You will have to do worse."

Dracena shut her eyes. "I know."

"Much worse."

"I know."

He turned. "Look at me. You have not yet received the Mark. Until you do, your role is to create distance. Nothing more."

Dracena nodded.

"Once you have taken it, however, there can be no ambiguity. Your allegiance must be unmistakable."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

She met his eyes. "Yes, Professor."

Snape studied her.

Then he reached into a drawer and withdrew a small black box. He placed it on the desk.

Dracena stared. "What's that?"

"An ointment."

She blinked. "An ointment?"

"The Mark is not applied painlessly."

Dracena looked at the box.

Snape continued. "You will be expected to endure the ceremony without complaint. You will be watched."

She nodded. "The ointment will help afterward."

Dracena looked at him. "Thank you."

Snape's expression hardened. "Do not thank me yet."

She lowered her eyes. He returned to his chair.

"Now. Again."

Dracena straightened. She arranged her face. Professor Snape began teaching her how to break Harry Potter's heart.

The Mark

The room was colder than Dracena had expected. She wasn't certain why that surprised her. The manor was enormous, and many of its rooms were difficult to heat in winter.

But this wasn't an ordinary cold. It seemed to settle beneath her skin. The chamber was lit by candles arranged along the walls. Their flames burned steadily, without flickering, despite the occasional movement of robes.

There were twelve people present. Several wore masks. She recognized some of the others.

Avery.
Nott.
Her aunt Bellatrix.
And her father.

Lucius Malfoy stood near the far wall, his silver-headed cane resting against his leg. He had been unusually quiet throughout the evening.

Dracena had expected him to be pleased. After all, she was finally joining the cause he'd served for so many years. She was proving herself worthy of the family name. Yet when she'd approached him earlier, he'd barely spoken. He'd simply adjusted the collar of her robes. A strange gesture. Almost tender.

"Stand straight." he'd murmured.

She did so.

He'd looked at her for a long moment, then he'd stepped away. Now she stood in the center of the chamber, waiting.

The air changed. Dracena felt it before she saw him. The conversations stopped. A figure emerged from the darkness at the far end of the room.

Tall. Thin. Almost skeletal. His skin was unnaturally pale, stretched tightly over a face that seemed to have forgotten what it meant to be human.

His eyes were red. His nose...

Dracena stopped herself from staring, and she lowered her head.

"Miss Malfoy."

The voice was high and cold. It carried a faint hiss. She had heard it before, through the study door a few days ago. It seemed like forever ago.

"Your Lordship." Someone nearby shifted. Dracena wondered whether she'd used the wrong form of address. Then the figure laughed softly.

"Such exquisite manners."

She kept her head lowered.

"Your father has raised you well."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Look at me."

She obeyed.

Voldemort studied her.

His eyes moved across her face. Dracena had the unpleasant sensation that he was examining something he intended to purchase.

"Sixteen years old."

"Yes, my Lord."

"And already so accomplished."

She said nothing.

"Your father speaks highly of you."

Dracena's heart lifted despite herself. She glanced toward Lucius. He didn't smile.

Voldemort noticed.

"Does that please you?"

"Of course, my Lord. Of course."

He moved closer.

"Your family has served me for many years."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Your father has made great sacrifices."

Dracena looked toward Lucius again. Something in his expression made her uneasy.

"Yes, my Lord."

"And now his daughter wishes to follow him."

She straightened. "I would be honored."

Voldemort smiled. It was a terrible thing to see.

"Would you?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Then let us see whether you are worthy."

He extended his hand. "Your arm."

Dracena hesitated for only a fraction of a second, then she offered her left arm.

Voldemort tilted his head. "The other."

She switched arms. He took her right wrist. His fingers were cold. Not merely cool, but cold in a way living fingers shouldn't be. He turned her arm upward.

Dracena stared at the pale skin of her forearm. She had seen the Mark before, on her father.
On others.
She knew what was coming. Knowing didn't help.

Voldemort raised his wand. "Do you swear loyalty to me?"

"I do, my Lord."

"Above all others?"

Dracena felt her father's eyes on her. "Yes, my Lord."

"Above family?"

Her heart stumbled. She looked toward Lucius. He stood perfectly still. Dracena returned her gaze to Voldemort.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Above friendship?"

Harry's face appeared in her mind. She forced it away.

"Yes, my Lord."

Voldemort's smile widened.

"Above love?"

For one terrible instant, she couldn't speak. Harry. His smile. His ridiculous hair. The way he'd held her hand beneath the table when he thought nobody was watching. The way he'd kissed her.

The way he'd said... *I love you*.

Dracena swallowed. "Yes, my Lord."

Voldemort watched her, then he pressed his wand against her arm.

Pain exploded through her. Dracena had never experienced anything like it. It was as though something had seized the bones of her arm and begun twisting them apart. Her knees threatened to buckle. She locked them.

Her vision blurred. The room tilted. She could hear someone breathing. A strange, ragged sound. It took her a moment to realize it was her.

She would not scream. She would **not.**

The pain spread upward, into her shoulder, across her chest. For a moment she thought she might faint. Abruptly, it stopped.

Voldemort released her wrist. Dracena staggered. She caught herself before she fell. Her arm burned.

She looked down. The Dark Mark lay against her skin.

Black.
Ugly.
Unmistakable.

A skull. A serpent emerging from its mouth.

She stared. It was real. She had done it.

She was now a Death Eater.

Voldemort watched her. "Well?"

Dracena raised her head. She smiled.

Not broadly. Not foolishly. A small, proud smile. The smile of a young aristocrat who had just received a tremendous honor.

"Thank you, my Lord."

Voldemort laughed. "Excellent."

He turned toward the others. "Behold. Another Malfoy."

There was applause. Dracena bowed her head. Her arm was still trembling. She concealed it beneath her sleeve.

Across the room, Lucius Malfoy began to applaud. Slowly. Deliberately. He watched his daughter smile.

She looked magnificent. Composed. Proud. Every inch a Malfoy.

He should have been pleased. He had spent sixteen years preparing her for precisely this kind of moment.

Yet something was wrong. He knew these people. Not the way Dracena knew them. He knew what they did when the masks came off. He knew what happened to people who disappointed them. He knew how quickly loyalty became a demand for sacrifice, and now his daughter stood among them.

His little girl was wearing their Mark.

He looked at Voldemort. For the first time in many years, Lucius Malfoy wondered whether he had made a terrible mistake.

Dracena made it back to Hogwarts without crying. She made it through the entrance hall.
Up the stairs.
Along the corridor.
Past a pair of laughing Ravenclaws.
She even managed to smile politely at Professor Flitwick.

She reached her dormitory. Closed the door and secured it

She pulled up her sleeve.

The Mark was still there. Of course it was.

She stared at it. The ointment Snape had given her sat unopened on her bedside table. She didn't want to touch it.

She didn't want to touch anything.

She sat on the bed. She thought of her father. She thought of Voldemort. She thought of the people who had applauded.

And then she thought of Harry. Harry, who had apologized to her in the entrance hall. Harry, who still believed she was merely being difficult. Harry, who would probably try to talk to her again tomorrow.

She imagined his face when he saw the Mark .
She imagined him asking why.
She imagined telling him. *It was all a lie.*

Her breath caught. She bent forward. For several seconds she couldn't move, then a sound escaped her.

A small, broken noise.

She clapped a hand over her mouth, but it didn't help.

She began to cry.

She cried until she couldn't breathe properly, until her throat hurt, until her entire body shook.

She wanted Harry. That was the worst part. She wanted him to come through the door.
To sit beside her.
To put his arms around her.
To tell her everything would be all right.
And she knew that if he did, she would tell him everything.

She would tell him about Voldemort. About Snape. About the Mark . About what she was trying to do. And then all of it would have been for nothing.

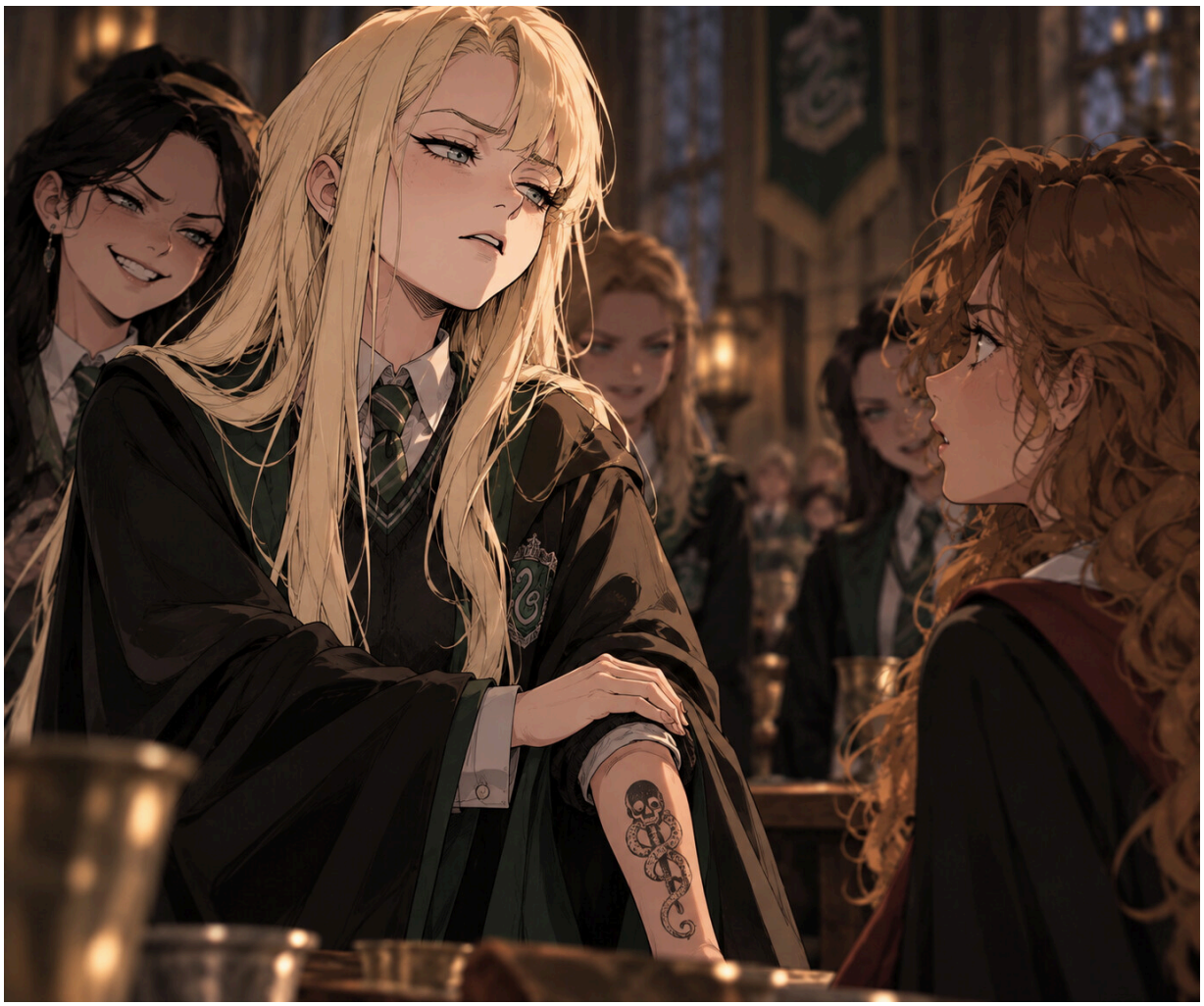
She curled onto her side. Her right arm lay across the pillow. The Mark stared back at her. She pulled her sleeve down.

Tomorrow, she would have to show it to Harry.
Tomorrow, she would have to make him hate her.

Dracena buried her face in the pillow. "Stupid Potter." she whispered. But there was no anger in it.

Not anymore.

The Performance



Pansy Parkinson had always possessed a remarkable ability to make breakfast unpleasant. It was, Dracena thought, almost admirable.

Dracena hated it.

She sat at the Slytherin table with her back straight, her hair immaculate, and her face arranged into the expression generations of Malfoys had developed specifically for occasions when they wished the rest of humanity would stop existing.

Professor Snape had called it useful. He had also called it "insufferable." Dracena had chosen to interpret that as praise.

She hadn't seen Harry yet this morning. She remembered earlier in the week when she called him "Obsessed." She remembered a few days ago when he tried to kiss her, and she stopped him. "My makeup!" she said. "I don't want it smudged. Honestly, Potter..."

Harry hadn't seen her. Dracena had been relieved, then disappointed. She was ashamed of being relieved.

Hermione approached. Dracena saw her before Hermione saw her. Her stomach tightened. Hermione was carrying three books because breakfast was an insufficient reason to stop studying.

Dracena looked back at her plate.

Pansy noticed Hermione. Unfortunately, Pansy noticed everything that might potentially become someone else's problem.

"Well, look who's back."

Hermione stopped. "Pansy."

"Granger."

Hermione's eyes moved past her, to Dracena. Dracena continued buttering her toast, ignoring what she knew was coming.

Pansy smiled. "Did you have a nice Muggle Christmas?"

"Yes, actually."

"How quaint."

Hermione rolled her eyes, and started to walk away.

Pansy wasn't finished. "Did they give you books?"

Hermione stopped. "Yes."

"How exciting. Perhaps one of them can teach you how to stop being such a stupid Mudblood."

Several nearby conversations died. Dracena's knife stopped. Hermione looked at Pansy, then at Dracena. She didn't ask. She didn't need to. Dracena knew exactly what Hermione expected.

Two weeks ago she might have reminded her that Hermione had beaten both of them on the last Transfiguration examination. Earlier in the week? She spent the last few nights with Professor Snape learning how to lie.

"*You control Dracena Malfoy.*"

She put down her knife. "Oh, come on, Pansy."

Hermione relaxed. Dracena saw it. That made what was coming next feel much worse.

"Hermione is one of the best students in the school." Pansy frowned. Dracena looked directly at Hermione. "She's certainly not stupid." Hermione's mouth almost became a smile. Dracena waited. "Even if she **is** a Mudblood."

Hermione's expression went blank. Dracena felt something inside herself tear. She dared not show it. "And when things finally change around here, being clever isn't going to make people like her matter."

Silence fell over the entire cafeteria. Dracena could feel people listening. Good. They needed to, for this performance to work.

Hermione stared at her. "What?"

Dracena shrugged. "You heard me."

"Dracena." The hurt in Hermione's voice was almost enough.

Almost. Dracena heard Snape again.

No hidden messages. No clever little phrase only the two of you understand. ***Nothing.***

So she smiled. "I had a rather educational Christmas."

Hermione stared at her. Pansy was staring too. Everyone was. Dracena could feel the weight of it. This was the moment. She had known it was coming. Her left hand moved to her right sleeve. She hesitated, then pulled it upward. The Dark Mark lay against the pale skin of her forearm. Black. Ugly. Unmistakable.

Hermione's mouth opened. Had the laws of anatomy permitted her jaw to hit the floor, Dracena suspected it would have.

Across the hall, Harry Potter heard the slur Mudblood. He hadn't been paying attention. Ron was explaining something about a Chudley Cannons trade that Harry didn't follow and didn't particularly care about. Harry had been nodding at intervals and wondering where Dracena was. Something seemed different about her after Christmas. He wondered what he might have done wrong. Still... He'd expected her to find him. Or he'd expected to find her. Then he'd heard the slur, "Mudblood." Harry turned. Pansy Parkinson.

Of course. Then, he saw Dracena.

Harry got up, and noticed Hermione's face. He realized Pansy hadn't said it. Dracena had. He stopped. She was holding up her sleeve. Then Harry saw the tattoo. All the colour left his face.

Ron followed his stare. "What the ...?"

Harry didn't hear him. The world was dissolving around him. He was already moving. Dracena saw him coming. Her heart began pounding so hard she wondered whether anyone else could hear it. Harry stopped several feet away. His eyes were fixed on her arm. Then her face. Then her arm again.

"Dracena..."

Don't... she said to herself. *Please don't. Not here. Not like this. I'm not ready for this...*

"I thought..." Harry said, voice unsure, trailing off.

Dracena smiled. "What, Potter?" He flinched. Good. No. Not good. Necessary.

She stood. "You thought what?"

Harry looked completely lost. Dracena had seen Harry frightened. She had seen him angry. She had seen him embarrassed, jealous, reckless, arrogant, exhausted and once so happy he'd picked her up and spun her around until she'd threatened to hex him. She had never seen him look like this. "You thought I could actually have feelings for someone like **you** ?"

His mouth opened. Nothing came out. Dracena wanted to die. Instead, she laughed. A small, dismissive laugh. Perfect. "That's cute."

Hermione whispered, "Dracena, what are you doing?" Dracena ignored her.

Harry's eyes hadn't left hers. "What about..." He stopped. Dracena knew exactly what he had almost said.

What about everything you told me?
What about the common room?
What about her father?
What about "I love you too?"
What about...
We don't lie about not knowing.

Dracena couldn't let him finish. "It was a test, Potter."

Harry stared at her. "A test?"

"Of course."

She raised her marked arm slightly. "And as you can see..." She smiled. She felt dirty. Filthy. She wanted to sit in the shower and scrub her skin away until it bled, she felt so dirty. "I passed with flying colours."

Harry's face crumpled, then he turned.

"Harry..." Ron said something she didn't catch. Harry ran. He made it six steps. His foot caught the end of a bench. He went down spectacularly. Someone gasped. A few Slytherins laughed.

Dracena didn't.

Harry scrambled upright so quickly that he nearly fell again. Ron went after him.

"Harry!"

Harry shoved through the doors and disappeared.

Dracena stood motionless.

You control Dracena Malfoy.

Her fingernails were cutting into her palm.

You control Dracena Malfoy.

Hermione was still there. Dracena looked at her. Hermione's eyes were wet. That was somehow worse than Harry running. Hermione looked at the Mark on her arm, Then Dracena. Then the Mark again.

"You..."

Dracena raised an eyebrow.

Hermione swallowed. "You Slytherin cunt."

The Great Hall went silent. Even Pansy looked impressed.

Hermione picked up the book she'd dropped. She gathered her things carefully, turned, and slowly walked out of the Great Hall without looking back. Dracena watched her go, then sat down. Pansy stared at her.

"Malfoy."

"What?"

"That was..." Pansy searched for the word. She didn't find it.

Dracena picked up her toast. "Pass the marmalade."

The Depression



Harry stopped going to breakfast. He still went to lunch. Usually. Dinner depended on whether Ron or Hermione physically dragged him there.

For the first week, everyone tried talking to him. That was a mistake.

Ron tried anger . "She's a bloody Death Eater, mate. Forget her."
Harry had left the room.

Hermione tried reason . "What she did was horrible, Harry, but you cannot let it destroy you."
Harry had left the room.

Ginny tried distraction.
Harry had left the room.

Neville eventually discovered the most effective strategy. He sat beside Harry and said nothing. So they did that sometimes. Neville would sit there, in complete silence. Sometimes, he'd be working with a plant. He just sat next to Harry. That seemed to help, somehow.

Harry's schoolwork deteriorated. Now, Harry had never been Hermione, but assignments became late. Then incomplete. Professor McGonagall returned one Transfiguration essay with a grade Harry had not received since second year. She asked him to remain after class.

"Mr Potter."

"I'm fine."

"I did not ask."

Harry looked away.

McGonagall regarded him over her spectacles.

"Whatever has happened, you are still expected to perform to the best of your ability."

"Yes, Professor."

"You are presently not doing so."

"No, Professor."

Her expression softened.

"See that you begin."

Harry nodded.

Quidditch went next. Harry missed a catch he should have made blindfolded. During the following practice, he flew directly past the Snitch because he'd been staring at the Slytherin stands. Dracena wasn't even there. The captain landed beside him afterward.

"Harry."

"What"

"Harry!"

"I'm fine."

"You keep saying that."

"I am."

"You're off Saturday's roster."

"What?"

"You're now Alternate."

"You can't..."

"I can. And I just did."

Harry stared at him.

"For how long?"

"Until I get my Seeker back."

Harry wanted to argue. He didn't have the energy. "Fine."

"I'm worried about Harry." Ron was sitting on the floor of the Gryffindor common room. Hermione looked up from her book. Neville was repotting something that hissed whenever he touched its roots.

"We're all worried about Harry." Hermione said.

"No, I mean really worried."

Hermione closed the book.

Ron stared into the fire.

"He was never this bad over Cho."

"Cho didn't tell him she loved him and then ran off to join the Death Eaters." Hermione said.

Ron grimaced. "Yeah."

Neville carefully pressed soil around the plant. "He'll pull through."

Ron looked at him. "How do you know?"

Neville shrugged. "Because I refuse to believe anything else."

Hermione stared at him, then smiled faintly. "That's not very logical."

"No." Neville said, while carefully placing more soil around the hissing plant.

Harry did pull through. Slowly. There was no morning when he woke and discovered Dracena Malfoy no longer mattered. He almost wished there had been. Instead, he simply became tired of being miserable. The first assignment he completed properly was Potions. That annoyed him. Snape returned it with: Acceptable. At last. Harry nearly tore it in half. Instead he kept it.

His marks improved. Slowly.

He returned to Quidditch practice.

The first time he caught the Snitch again, nobody made a great fuss. The captain simply nodded.

"Again."

Harry flew again. He caught it easily.

Life resumed. Mostly.

A Ravenclaw girl named Amelia Foster asked him out in March. She caught him outside Charms.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

She was pretty. Harry noticed that objectively. Dark hair. Nice smile. Under other circumstances...

"Would you maybe want to go to Hogsmeade with me Saturday?"

Harry stared at her. She blushed. "I mean, just us." There was an awkward pause.

"No."

Her face fell. Harry immediately realized he'd said it too quickly.

"It's fine." she said, walking away too quickly.

"I'm just not..."

"You don't have to explain." Harry stood there feeling like a jerk.

Ron appeared from around the corner.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Did Amelia Foster just ask you out?"

Harry picked up his bag.

"No."

"She absolutely did."

"Then why'd you ask?"

Ron stared after Amelia, then at Harry.

"She's pretty."

"I know."

"She's smart."

"I know."

"She likes Quidditch."

"Yeah."

"Harry." Ron said.

"What?"

Ron hesitated. "Nothing."

Harry walked away. He wasn't interested. That was all. Maybe someday. Just not now. He didn't know for how long. The thought hurt less than it used to.

Dracena watched him from across the Great Hall. She had become very good at not watching Harry Potter. She knew where he sat without looking. She knew when he entered a room from the sound of Ron's voice. Knew when he laughed. That had taken the longest to return. His laugh.

The first time she'd heard it after everything, she'd nearly cried. She hadn't. Dracena had also become very good at not crying. She watched him now only because he wasn't looking. Harry stood near the end of the Gryffindor table, eating an apple while Neville told him something.

Harry laughed.

Dracena looked down.
There were things Harry didn't know.
Things Hermione didn't know.
Names.
Dates.
Places.
Conversations overheard.
A Ministry office that had secretly been evacuated before something terrible could happen.
Someone who had been warned not to take their usual route home.
Other things.
Small things.

A few large things.
Things Dracena herself didn't entirely understand.

She passed them to Snape. Snape never praised her. Of course he didn't.

Occasionally he said: "This is useful." Dracena had learned this was equivalent to anyone else leaping onto a table and applauding. It mattered.

People were alive who might not otherwise have been. She reminded herself of that whenever Harry laughed. Whenever Hermione walked past without looking at her. Whenever Father wrote to tell her how proud he was that she'd finally remembered who she was. That one hurt differently.

Dracena looked across the Great Hall again. Harry was smiling.

"*That's why.*"

She repeated it silently.

"*That's why.*"

It happened on a Tuesday. Nothing important should happen on a Tuesday. Dracena was leaving Ancient Runes. Harry was coming the other way. Neither saw the other around the corner.

They collided. Books went everywhere.

"Bloody hell."

"Sorry."

They both crouched automatically. Harry gathered his things.

Dracena reached for a textbook. Harry picked up one of hers.

"Here, you..."

He looked up, into her eyes.

Everything stopped. Dracena froze. They were very close. Closer than they'd been since January. Harry's hand was still resting on her book,

inches away from her hand.

For one terrible second, neither moved. Dracena forgot every lesson Snape had taught her.

Forgot Voldemort.
Forgot her father.
Forgot the Mark hidden beneath her sleeve.

It was just Harry. Messy hair. Beautiful hair. She missed running her hands through it. Green eyes. She missed staring into them right before he...

STOP THAT she thought to herself.

He looked older. That frightened her. Something behind his eyes had changed. *She'd* done that. Dracena's mouth moved before her mind caught it.

"Harry..."

His face changed. Dracena knew immediately that she'd made a mistake. Not operationally. Nobody was around. Something worse. She'd hurt him again.

Harry looked at her. For a moment she thought he might say something. Demand an explanation. Instead he put her book down, and stood up.

"Fuck you, Dracena." He turned and walked away, slowly.

Dracena remained on the floor. She listened to his footsteps disappear around the corner. One of her pieces of parchment had landed several feet away. She stared at it.

Her vision blurred. "No. Not here." she demanded of herself. Dracena closed her eyes. Breathed.

"*You control Dracena Malfoy.*"

She wanted to cry.

"*You control Dracena Malfoy.*"

She wanted to run after him. Tell him everything. Tell him she loved him. Tell him she'd never stopped. Tell him that every horrible thing she'd said in the Great Hall had been rehearsed with Snape until she'd been able to say it without shaking.

She needed to tell him the Mark on her arm made her sick.
Tell him she'd watched him fall apart and had been forbidden to help.
Tell him people were alive because of what she was doing.
Tell him she was sorry.
Tell him to wait for her.
Tell him she didn't know whether she had any right to ask.

Dracena opened her eyes. She did none of those things, because Harry's hatred hurt.

But Harry being dead would hurt more.
Hermione being dead would hurt more.
Another Edwin Pritchard being dead would hurt more.

And somewhere, Voldemort believed Harry Potter had learned to hate Dracena Malfoy.

Good. Let him.

Dracena picked up the last piece of parchment. She stood. Straightened her robes, lifted her chin, and walked to class.

Pansy Parkinson, under the effects of a Disillusionment Charm, watched Dracena. Pansy was seconds away from sneaking into Professor Flitwick's office to steal the answer key to tomorrow's exam, when she happened to notice the exchange.

"Huh. Interesting..." she said to herself. She tapped the Mark on her forearm.

The Capture



Dracena woke because someone was touching her shoulder. She made an irritated noise and pulled the blankets higher. The hand shook her again.

"Dracena." the voice called out, quietly.

"Mfff." she responded, sleepily.

"Dracena."

"I'm sleeping. Whatever it is, it can wait until morning."

A giggle. Dracena opened one eye.

Pansy Parkinson stood beside her bed. She was smiling. She was smiling far too widely. Dracena opened the other eye.

"What's up, Sleepyhead?" Pansy asked.

Dracena faked a yawn. Then she noticed the two girls standing behind Pansy. Both were Slytherins. Both played Quidditch. Both were built like wardrobes. They were also smiling far too widely.

Dracena's sleepiness evaporated suddenly. There was a fourth girl behind them. Maribel Fawley. Sixth year. Spectacles. Always carried at least four books. Had once corrected Professor Binns on the date of a seventeenth-century goblin uprising and then produced three sources proving she was right. Dracena privately thought of her as Hermione Granger if Hermione had been born into an old pure-blood family and used her brain for sinister things.

Maribel wasn't smiling. Somehow that was worse.

Pansy held something up. "What's this?" she asked.

Dracena looked. Her heart stopped. An old iPhone. Cracked along one corner of the screen, many generations out of date. And unmistakably hers. Or, unmistakably the one Snape gave to her. Dracena's brain suddenly woke up fully. She faked another yawn. "Oh. That."

Pansy's smile widened.

"It's just a weird Muggle thing I found." Dracena said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Pansy turned it over in her hand.

"Interesting."

Dracena shrugged.

"It is, actually. Muggles have come up with some rather clever things."

"I know." Pansy said, grinning that unnerving grin. That wasn't the answer Dracena expected.

Pansy leaned closer. "It's an iPhone."

Dracena said nothing.

"I'm not as ignorant about all things Muggle as your family is." Pansy was enjoying this, far too much.

Dracena looked at the phone, then Pansy, then the two teenage siege engines behind her, then Maribel.

Well. Crap. She was screwed, but panic was information, and Dracena had no intention of providing any. She sat up and brushed her hair away from her face.

"Fine. It's an iPhone."

"And you have one."

"Apparently."

"Why?"

"I told you. I found it interesting."

"In your locked trunk?"

"I have many interesting things in my locked trunk."

"Under a false bottom?"

Dracena shrugged. "I didn't particularly want Father finding it."

Pansy laughed softly. "Uh huh." Sarcasm dripped from her voice. Pansy looked down at the phone, and Dracena watched her. There was still a chance. The thing was locked. She'd been careful about that. And...

"I wonder who's numbers you have in it?"

"Numbers?" Dracena said, unconvincingly.

Pansy's grin became almost feral. "Come now. You want me to believe you don't know how to use this? Even though it's charged up and locked? There isn't any electricity in Hogwarts, you know. It's 90% charged."

"Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap, crap." Dracena said to herself.

"How about you show us what you have in here ?" Pansy said, grinning.

"Certainly." Dracena held out her hand. "Give it here."

Pansy laughed. "Uh, No. I have a much safer idea."

Behind her, Maribel stepped forward. Dracena looked at her. Maribel produced a small vial. Dracena's stomach dropped.

Oh No. No no no no no.

Maribel uncorked it, and she drank.

Dracena threw off the blankets.

One of the Quidditch girls moved, and pushed Dracena back. Maribel doubled over. Her body shifted. Her short, dark hair lengthened and turned pale blonde. Her face twisted and reformed. Seconds later, Dracena Malfoy was standing beside Dracena Malfoy's bed.

The other Dracena adjusted her nightdress. "Merlin." she said in Dracena's voice. "Your hair is ridiculous." Under other circumstances Dracena would have been offended.

Pansy handed her the phone. The false Dracena pressed her thumb against it. The screen unlocked. Pansy looked down as Maribel began touching the

screen, and scrolling.

Dracena could hear her own heartbeat.

"*You control Dracena Malfoy.*" Dracena concentrated on controlling Dracena Malfoy.

They had the phone. They managed to unlock it. Still, that didn't mean they understood it. That didn't mean...

Maribel stopped scrolling. "Oh." she said, theatrically.

Pansy looked over her shoulder.

"Oh, **dear.** "

Dracena worked furiously to keep her face blank. Pansy looked at her.

"That's quite a lot of messages. All of them rather recent."

"It's a phone. That's generally what they're for."

"Uh huh. And why are you actually using this one?"

Pansy stepped closer to Maribel and looked over at the screen. Maribel grinned and showed her what she found.

"Names."

Dracena said nothing.

"Dates. Places."

Dracena's mouth had gone dry.

"Things the Dark Lord apparently intends to do."

There was no point denying what was on the screen, so Dracena didn't. She kept quiet.

Pansy's smile disappeared. That frightened Dracena considerably more than the smile had.

"And all of them." Pansy said softly, "being sent to someone."

Dracena looked at Maribel wearing her face.
At the phone in "her" hand.
At the two behemoths.
She considered screaming. Bad plan.
Her wand. On the bedside table. No, too far away..
Escape through the window. No. Also too far.
Four against one. Worse, she was in bed, being blocked by human Quidditch dummies.

Pansy tilted her head. "So."

Dracena looked at her.

"Who have you been talking to?"

Dracena smiled. It wasn't much of one, but it was a smile.

"Pansy."

"Yes?"

"Go kiss a Blast-Ended Skrewt."

Pansy's smile returned. "Thought so." Her wand was already in her hand. Dracena moved, but it was too late.

" **Somnum dormientis.** " Pansy's wand flicked sideways, then tapped Dracena on her forehead.

The room tilted as the spell hit her full on. Dracena reached for the bedside table. Her arm suddenly weighed a hundred pounds. She tried to shout. Nothing coherent came out. She felt the drowsiness slowly descend on her, like a theater curtain. Her vision blurred. Her limbs stopped obeying her. She fell sideways onto the mattress. *Snape*. She had to...

Harry.

No. Don't think about Harry. Don't...

Someone rolled her onto her stomach. Dracena felt her wrists pulled together. Rope tightened around them. She tried to fight. Her body barely

moved. She fought to stay awake. Voices seemed to come from very far away as sleep slowly claimed her.

"Hurry."

"I am!"

"Get her legs."

"Where's the..."

Darkness descended over her face.

For one confused instant Dracena thought the spell had finally taken her. Then she smelled laundry soap. A pillowcase. They were pulling a bloody pillowcase over her head. Some distant, absurd part of her mind was offended by the indignity.

Her hands were bound behind her back. She tried one last time to move. Couldn't.

The darkness became warm. Heavy. Dracena heard Pansy's voice.

"Sleep tight."

Then sleep claimed her.

The Concequences

"I told him."

Dracena's voice barely sounded like hers anymore.

Someone stood in front of her. She couldn't quite make out who. Her vision kept going soft around the edges.

"What?"

"I told him."

A hand caught her hair and pulled her head back. Dracena made a small squeal of pain.

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"Everything, Malfoy?"

"Yes."

"Who did you tell?" a voice demanded.

"Snape."

The hand released her.

Dracena's head fell forward.

"Professor Snape."

"How long?"

"Since January."

"And Dumbledore?"

"Didn't know."

"Your father?"

Dracena's eyes moved. Lucius stood against the far wall. He had been standing there for most of it. She couldn't remember exactly when they'd brought him in. Before the second Cruciatus, perhaps. Maybe after. Time had become unreliable.

Father looked immaculate except for his face. His face looked terrible. Dracena looked away.

"He didn't know."

Someone laughed. "No." another voice said. "He certainly didn't."

Dracena closed her eyes.

"What did you give Snape?"

"Names."

"Whose?"

She told them.

"Locations?"

She told them.

"Which operations?"

She told them.

There was no heroic resistance. No clever lie. No brave declaration that they could kill her before she betrayed anyone. Dracena Malfoy had imagined, once, that perhaps she would be capable of something like that.

She wasn't. They had hurt her. She had tried not to talk. Then they had hurt her more. Then she had talked. It had not taken particularly long.

Snape had warned her. " *Do you know what the Dark Lord does to people who lie to him?*"
"*No*."
"*I do*."
Now she did too.

"Who did you warn about Selwyn?"

"Snape."

"The Ministry raid in February?"

"Snape."

"Yaxley's contact?"

"Snape."

"The safe house in York?"

"Snape."

"The shipment from Albania?"

"Snape."

Each answer made someone angrier. That was when Dracena began to understand. They already knew. Maybe not everything, but enough. This wasn't an interrogation anymore. Perhaps it hadn't been for some time. It was revenge. They were angry. Dracena had cost them people.
Money.
Plans.
Safe houses.
Months of work.

People had escaped because of her. People who were supposed to die, had lived. Death Eaters who were supposed to disappear quietly into respectable society had instead found Aurors waiting for them. She had done more damage than she'd known. That realization should have made her proud. At the moment it mostly made her terrified.

One of the Death Eaters crouched in front of her. "Do you know how many friends you cost me?" Dracena breathed through her mouth.

"No."

"Three."

"I'm..."

She stopped herself.

"*Sorry*" seemed inappropriate. Besides, she wasn't.

The man smiled. "Let's see whether you can remember anything else."

Dracena's eyes widened.

"I told you everything."

"I know."

That was the worst answer possible.

"No."

His wand rose. "No, please. I told you..."

" **Crucio** ."

There were no thoughts after that. Only pain. When it stopped, Dracena realized she was on the floor. She didn't remember falling. Someone was crying. It took her a moment to realize it was her. She tasted blood. A boot nudged her onto her back.

Dracena stared at the ceiling. "I told you." she whispered.

"I know."

Another laugh. Dracena turned her head. Father was still there. His fists were clenched. His face was white.

And he was furious.
At them.
At her.
At himself.

"You've established your point." Lucius said. Nobody answered him. "You have the information."

"We're deciding whether she has more."

"She doesn't."

"How would you know?"

Lucius's jaw tightened.

"Apparently I wouldn't."

That hurt more than Dracena expected. Father looked at her. There were a thousand things Dracena wanted to say.

I'm sorry.
I had to.
You were wrong.
I still love you.
Please don't hate me.

Instead she whispered:

"Father, please..."

His face hardened. Dracena looked away. A Death Eater laughed. "Perhaps another round will improve her memory."

Lucius moved. Only half a step. Several wands immediately pointed toward him. He stopped.

"Enough." The door opened. Everyone became still. Dracena didn't need to look. She knew it was the Dark Lord.

Voldemort entered. He regarded Dracena on the floor with mild interest. "How disappointing."

Dracena hated that voice.

"All that promise." He walked around her. "All that pride."

Dracena tried to push herself upright. Her arms shook with fatigue and pain. She fell down on her back again.

Voldemort looked toward Lucius. "And all that confidence in your daughter."

Lucius said nothing.

"You insisted she was not a resource." His smile was thin. "In hindsight, I should have listened." he smiled, that awful, terrible smile.

Lucius' eyes moved to Dracena. Something ugly passed through his expression.

"You betrayed us."

Dracena closed her eyes.

"You betrayed **me** ." She opened her eyes again and tried to speak. Couldn't.

"Why?"

Dracena almost answered, Then Voldemort spoke. "Does it matter?"

Lucius looked at him. "It matters to me."

"How touching."

Voldemort turned toward Dracena. "Perhaps she can explain after we've finished."

One of the Death Eaters raised his wand again. Lucius's voice became very quiet. " **Do not** ."

The man paused. Voldemort smiled.

"Lucius."

"She has told you everything."

"Perhaps."

"You have made your point."

"I don't believe I have."

Voldemort looked at Dracena.

"Again."

The man's wand moved, then the world disappeared.

This time, it wasn't with pain. Everything just went dark

Dracena blinked. She was still awake. Still alive. She just couldn't see. Everything was absolute black. Someone shouted.

"What the.."

"LIGHT!"

"Lumos!"

Nothing happened.

"AURORS! DROP YOUR WANDS!"

Chaos. Dracena heard an explosion. Someone screamed. A door shattered. Spells cracked through the darkness.

"Peruvian Darkness Powder!"

"Clear the room!"

"Destroy everything!"

"Move!"

Footsteps went in every direction. Someone crashed into a table. Glass shattered. Dracena curled instinctively against the floor.

Hands touched her. She screamed.

"Dracena."

Father. She froze.

"It's me."

Something pulled at the ropes around her wrists.

A blade? No. A spell. She couldn't see.

"Father?"

"Quiet."

The ropes loosened. Dracena pulled one hand free, then the other. Her wrists burned. Lucius found her face in the darkness. His hands were

shaking. She had never felt her father's hands shake before.

"I love you, Dracena."

She stopped breathing.

"I'm sorry."

"Father..."

Something slammed into him. Lucius disappeared. Dracena heard bodies hit the floor.

"Father!"

"RUN!"

She didn't know whether the voice was his.

A spell struck the wall beside her. Stone exploded across her face. Dracena crawled.

Someone stepped on her hand. She screamed. Kept moving.

She found a wall. Followed it.

Someone grabbed her robes. She twisted away.

Another explosion.

For a few seconds she saw light through the darkness.

Red.
Green.
Gold.
Figures moving.

Aurors. Death Eaters. Blackness swallowed everything again. Dracena stumbled through a doorway.

"Father!"

No answer. She kept moving.

The Aurors had surprise . For perhaps three minutes, it was enough.

Until it wasn't.

The Death Eaters knew the building. They knew the exits. They knew which rooms mattered and which evidence had to burn. By the time the Darkness Powder began to thin, half the documents in the hideout were already on fire.

A masked Death Eater blasted an Auror through a doorway. Another collapsed the staircase. Someone shouted for retreat.

The raid had failed. Not completely. Nothing involving that much fire could be considered completely unsuccessful, but the Aurors were withdrawing.

Dracena realized this when two of them ran past her.

"Go!"

One grabbed her arm. Dracena tried to follow, but her leg buckled. The Auror caught her, then a curse struck him in the back. He fell.

Dracena hit the floor beside him. "No." she whispered. She crawled toward him.

A hand caught the back of her robes. Dracena kicked.

"LET GO!"

Someone dragged her backward. The last Auror disappeared through the doorway.

A spell hit the wall. The doorway collapsed. Dracena screamed.

"No!"

Dust filled the corridor. The hand holding her tightened. Dracena turned. A grotesque face.

Voldemort.

The darkness had mostly cleared now. He looked almost amused.

"So close." He said, in a serpentine voice.

Dracena stopped struggling. "No."

"So very close." He looked toward the ruined doorway. "Your rescuers appear to have abandoned you."

Dracena glared at him. Voldemort smiled.

"Where is Lucius?" Nobody answered. That smile disappeared. "Find him."

They did. Or, Lucius found them first. He stepped through the smoke and dust. His robes were torn and filthy, with black soot and dirt. His hair had come loose. There was blood along one side of his face. His wand was already raised. Dracena had never seen her father look less like Lucius Malfoy. Or more like him.

"Let her go."

Voldemort turned. "Ah."

Dracena stared.

"Father."

Lucius didn't look at her. "Leave my daughter alone."

"Lucius."

"If you have a grievance, you will address it to me."

Voldemort's expression became almost curious. "Your daughter betrayed you."

"Yes."

"She betrayed everything you claim to believe."

"Yes."

"She has cost us lives."

Lucius's jaw tightened. "I am aware."

"And still you defend her?"

Lucius finally looked at Dracena. She couldn't read his face. "She is my daughter."

Voldemort laughed. It wasn't loud. That made it worse.

"Oh, Lucius." He stepped closer. "You still misunderstand."

Lucius raised his wand slightly. "I understand perfectly."

Voldemort glanced at Dracena. "Killing her would punish her."

Dracena went cold. "But pain is so much more instructive when applied to someone else's flesh." Voldemort laughed.

Lucius's face changed. Voldemort smiled.

"Every scream she makes tells me something about **you.** "

Something broke. Dracena saw it happen. Lucius Malfoy had spent years compromising.
Negotiating.
Rationalizing.
Drawing lines and moving them.
Giving Voldemort money.
Influence.
Names.
Contacts.
Telling himself that this concession prevented a worse one.

That cooperation preserved the family. That survival required unpleasant choices. Then Voldemort had put his daughter on the floor and tortured her so Lucius could watch. There were no more lines left to move.

Lucius raised his wand. " **Expelliarmus** !"

Voldemort deflected it. " **Avada Kedavra!** "

Lucius threw himself aside. Green light exploded against the wall.

The room erupted. Dracena rolled beneath a table. A red curse crossed above her. Lucius fired back. Voldemort twisted aside. Stone shattered.

" **Stupefy** !"
" **Protego** !"
" **Confringo** !"

Lucius ducked. The wall behind him exploded. He answered with something Dracena didn't recognize. Voldemort barely avoided it.

For the first time, Voldemort's expression changed. Surprise. Lucius pressed him. Spell after spell. Not elegant anymore. Not restrained. Furious.

Voldemort gave ground slightly.

Once.
Twice.
Dracena stared.

Her father was **GOOD** . She had known that, abstractly. Lucius Malfoy had been duelling since before she was born, but she'd never seen it. He moved with frightening precision. A flick of his wand sent a curse toward Voldemort's knees.

Voldemort jumped it and answered before landing. Lucius spun behind a stone pillar.

Green light carved a chunk from it.

"Father!"

"STAY DOWN!" Lucius hissed.

Dracena stayed down. For once in her life, she obeyed immediately.

Voldemort laughed. "You cannot win."

Lucius stepped from behind the pillar. "We'll see about that."

Another curse. Voldemort blocked. Lucius fired another. And another. Voldemort stopped smiling. Their spells collided. Light filled the room.

For several seconds neither gave ground, then the spells broke apart. Both men staggered backward.

Lucius was breathing hard. So was Voldemort.

Dracena realized something extraordinary. Father was losing. Voldemort had expected to crush him. Instead Lucius Malfoy was making him work for it. Voldemort realized it too.

His face twisted. "Enough."

Lucius raised his wand. So did Voldemort. Dracena saw what was coming.

"No!"

Voldemort's wand moved. " **AVADA KEDAVRA!** "

Lucius shouted at the same instant. " **EXPELLIARMUS!** "

Green. Red. And then? Black.

The world vanished again. A second cloud of Peruvian Darkness Powder exploded through the room.

"SECOND TEAM! MOVE!"

Aurors. More explosions. Someone grabbed Dracena.

She fought.

"Malfoy!" An unfamiliar voice. "WE'RE AURORS!"

Dracena stopped.

"My father!"

"We have to move!"

"My father!"

An auror hauled her upright. Her injured leg nearly folded. Dracena screamed. He caught her around the waist.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes." She lied.

Behind them, the room had become chaos again. Spells flashed through absolute darkness.

Red.
Green.
Blue.

Dracena twisted around. "FATHER!"

No answer. She tried to pull away. The Auror held her.

"He's back there!"

"We can't stay!"

"LUCIUS!"

Nothing.

Dracena stumbled. Her hand struck the wall. She pushed herself forward.

One step.
Another.
Her entire body hurt.
Her face was wet.
Blood or tears. Probably both.

Behind her came another explosion. The floor shook. Dracena turned one last time.

Darkness. Only darkness.

She didn't know whether her father's spell had landed. She didn't know whether Voldemort's had. She didn't know whether Lucius Malfoy was alive.

I don't know.

Harry's voice came back to her.

"*We don't lie about not knowing*."

Dracena limped into the darkness with the aurors.

And for once, not knowing was unbearable.

The End

Harry woke to someone pounding on the dormitory door.

"UP!"

He rolled over. For one confused moment, he had absolutely no idea where he was.

Professor McGonagall stood in the doorway in a tartan dressing gown, wand already in her hand. "Everyone up. Immediately. Robes on. Shoes. Wands."

Ron bolted upright. "What happened?"

"Great Hall. Now." Something in her voice ensured nobody asked another question.

Five minutes later, Harry was descending the stairs with several dozen frightened Gryffindors.

The corridors were full. Hufflepuffs came from one direction. Ravenclaws from another. Slytherins emerged from the dungeons. Nobody seemed to know what was happening.

Harry saw frightened first-years clutching one another's hands. A Ravenclaw girl was crying. One of the prefects kept insisting everything

was all right in a voice that made it perfectly clear everything was not all right.

Hermione found Harry and Ron near the entrance to the Great Hall.

"Do you know anything?"

"No."

"McGonagall wouldn't tell us."

"Me either."

They entered. Every student in Hogwarts seemed to be there. The doors slammed shut. Dumbledore stood before the staff table. He wasn't smiling. The room became silent.

"Shortly after midnight." he said, "we received credible information that Voldemort intends to attack Hogwarts." The silence broke into hundreds of frightened whispers. Harry felt Ron move closer beside him. Dumbledore raised his hand. The room became quiet again. "We believe the attack is imminent."

Harry's fingers tightened around his wand.

"Messages have been sent throughout Great Britain. Aurors, Ministry personnel and others willing to defend this school are already on their way." Dumbledore paused. "But Hogwarts is some distance from many of them."

Harry understood before Dumbledore said it.

"We may not have that time."

Hermione inhaled sharply.

"Students in their fifth year and below will be evacuated to a secure location. Your Heads of House will provide instructions."

Someone shouted: "What about us?"

Dumbledore looked toward the older students. "Sixth and seventh years will assist the staff."

The room erupted. McGonagall shouted for silence. Dumbledore waited. "I am not asking any of you to fight."

Harry frowned.

"You will be placed in groups around the castle and grounds. You are observers. Nothing more."

His expression hardened.

"I cannot emphasize this sufficiently: **do not be heroes.** "

Several people looked at Harry. Harry noticed. "Why is everyone looking at me?"

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered: "Can't imagine."

Dumbledore continued. "If you see anything suspicious, you **will** cast Periculum directly upward. A red signal will alert the staff. You will then withdraw toward the castle."

His eyes swept the room.

"You will not investigate. You will not pursue . You will not attempt to engage." Dumbledore's gaze landed directly upon Harry.

Harry looked offended.

Hermione whispered: "He's definitely talking to you."

Harry rolled his eyes.

A set of side doors clanged open. Another voice cut through the room. A dull, but strong monotone. "We are not entirely unprepared." Snape stepped forward. Dumbledore turned. Something about his expression changed.

"Severus?"

"We know their approximate numbers." Dumbledore stared at him. "We know their intended points of entry. We know which groups have been assigned to each objective. We know several of their fallback positions, the methods they've been training to breach the outer protections, and which

attacks are intended merely as diversions. Unfortunately, our spy was caught, but managed to barely escape with her life. Unfortunately, I believe this is why the attack is happening now."

Now Dumbledore looked genuinely dumbfounded. "How?"

Snape was silent for a moment. "As I said, I have a spy."

Harry's head snapped up. Something happened inside his chest. No. Impossible. Harry knew he shouldn't hope. He did, anyway.

Snape continued. "Someone successfully infiltrated the Death Eaters and has been providing me with intelligence for some time."

Harry couldn't breathe. Hermione looked at him. She'd realized it too.

Ron hadn't. "Blimey." he whispered. "Who?"

Harry didn't answer. Hope was a dangerous thing. Suddenly his heart was hammering.

Please.

Snape's expression was unreadable. "The information provided by this person has disrupted attacks, exposed safe houses, identified collaborators and allowed potential targets to be moved before the Dark Lord's forces reached them." He paused. "The number of lives saved is difficult to calculate."

Harry barely heard him. *Please*.

Snape looked toward the doors he entered from. "That intelligence was obtained at considerable personal cost."

The door opened. Someone limped through.

Harry stopped breathing.

He saw her platinum-blonde hair, first. Her filthy robes. One sleeve torn, and dried blood ran from her hairline down the side of her face. She was walking badly, favoring one leg.

There were bruises Harry could see even from across the Great Hall. She looked exhausted. She looked terrible. She looked beautiful.

She looked alive.

"Dracena!" Harry whispered.

Ron stared. "No bloody way."

Hermione covered her mouth.

Dracena stopped, standing beside Snape.

For the first time in months, Harry Potter looked at Dracena Malfoy...

...and she looked back.

Everything disappeared from her face.

The Great Hall.
Dumbledore.
Snape.
Hundreds of students.

For one second there was only Harry. Harry was already moving. He didn't remember deciding to.

"Dracena!" She barely had time to turn before he reached her.

Harry stopped inches away.
He wanted to grab her.
He wanted to scream at her.
He wanted to ask what had happened to her face.
He wanted to kiss her.
He wanted to know why she'd destroyed him.

Instead, what came out was: "Why didn't you tell me?"

Dracena stared at him, dumbfounded. "Because I'm a spy, Potter."

Harry blinked.

"Being a Spy generally works better when nobody knows she's a spy." she said, matter of factly.

"You could've told *me!* "

"No, I couldn't!"

"Why?"

"Because you're a terrible liar!"

"I am not!"

Dracena stared at him.

Harry thought about it. "All right, sometimes."

"Harry, you once tried to conceal something from McGonagall by standing in front of it."

"It nearly worked."

"It was on fire."

Ron made a strangled noise behind them.

Dracena's mouth twitched. Harry stared at her.

That expression.
That voice. It was her. Actually her. His eyes filled before he could stop them.

"Dracena..."

Her expression softened. "Harry."

He stepped toward her.
She stepped toward him.
Harry stopped. Something inside him wouldn't move. Months of grief didn't simply disappear because he'd been given an explanation.

Dracena saw it. The hope on her face collapsed. "Oh."

Harry hated himself immediately. "No. Dracena, I..." he tried to lurch forward.

"It's all right." She said.

"It isn't."

"I understand."

"No, you don't."

Her face closed. Harry recognized that too. The Malfoy mask.

"Later." she said.

"Dracena..." "Later, Potter."

Then she looked toward Dumbledore. "We're going to stop Voldemort tonight."

She glanced back at Harry. "Would you like to help, or are you planning to spend the evening moping?"

Harry stared, then, despite everything, laughed.

Dracena smiled.

They were assigned the eastern grounds. Harry thought this was ridiculous.

"It's completely lit."

"That's presumably the idea." Hermione said.

Lumos charms floated above the grounds at regular intervals, illuminating the lawn almost to the forest. Nobody could approach unseen. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Dracena stood together near an old stone wall.

Dracena leaned against it.

Harry noticed. "You're hurt."

"I'm observant too, Potter."

"Seriously."

"So am I."

"Should you even be out here?"

"No." She said.

Harry frowned.

Dracena sighed. "I told Madam Pomfrey I was going to bed."

Hermione stared. "You lied to Madam Pomfrey?"

"Granger, I spent several months lying to Voldemort. I can manage the school nurse."

Ron snorted.

Hermione didn't. She was looking at Dracena.

Dracena noticed. "What?"

Hermione folded her arms. "You called me Mudblood." The humor vanished.

Dracena looked away. "I know."

"You said people like me wouldn't matter when things changed."

"I know."

"You showed me the Mark."

Dracena touched her sleeve.

"I know."

Hermione's voice trembled. "I thought you meant it. I really thought you meant it."

"I needed you to." Dracena said, shakily.

"Well, congratulations."

Dracena flinched.

Hermione immediately looked guilty, But Dracena nodded.

"No. That's fair."

They were silent for a long moment.

"I hated it." She said, looking away toward the forest.

Hermione looked at her.

"Every. Time." Dracena swallowed. "I kept telling myself they were only words." She looked down. "They weren't."

"I had to use things that were true."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked.

"Professor Snape taught me that the best lies are built around truths."

Harry listened.

"I really had been angry with Hermione. Jealous, really. I really looked down on Muggles. I really thought Potter was insufferable sometimes."

Harry almost smiled. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Dracena grinned at him for a moment, then continued.

"I used all of it. Every ugly thought I'd ever had. Every argument. Every moment someone made me feel ashamed of my family." She looked at Hermione. "And I turned them into something worse."

Hermione's anger had softened.

Dracena stared at the grass. "I felt filthy."

Harry said quietly: "Then why did you do it?"

Dracena looked at him. For a moment Harry thought she'd become angry. Instead she looked tired. "My father."

Harry stiffened. Dracena noticed.

"No. Listen."

Harry listened.

"I overheard him speaking to Voldemort."

Harry's hand tightened around his wand.

"Voldemort wanted Father to use me against you."

"What?"

"He wanted me to get close to you. Poison you, or curse you. Lure you somewhere."

Harry stared.

"Father said no."

Everyone was shocked. Dracena smiled sadly.

"He told Voldemort I wasn't a resource. That I hadn't taken any oath. That if Voldemort wanted Harry Potter dead, he could do his own killing."

Harry didn't know what to say.

"I was proud of him." Dracena's voice cracked. "God, Harry, I was so proud of him." She wiped her face angrily. "And then the next morning I read about a man who'd been murdered by Death Eaters."

Hermione listened silently.

"My father knew him." Dracena swallowed. "And I started thinking." Her voice cracked. She looked toward Harry. "If Father could stand in front of Voldemort and say no for *me* ..."

Dracena barely held back her tears "...then why couldn't he say no for anyone else?"

Harry understood.

"I still don't know the answer." Dracena looked at him. "I still love him."

"I know."

"I still think there are things he's right about."

"I know."

"I still think you're wrong about him sometimes."

Harry nodded.

"Probably."

That surprised her.

"But I knew people were dying." She looked at all three of them. "And I knew I was in a position to do something."

Harry's chest hurt. "So you did."

"I tried."

"You did more than try."

Dracena looked away. Harry stepped closer.

"You wish you could have told me."

"I couldn't."

"I know that. Still."

"I hurt you."

"Yes." he said. She flinched.

Harry continued. "But I understand why."

"That's not the same as forgiving me."

"No."

Dracena nodded.

"We don't lie about not knowing."

Harry stared at her.

Their promise.

"I don't know yet." he said.

"All right." She said.

"But..."

Harry stepped closer. Dracena looked up.

"I think I want to try."

Her eyes filled. "I'd like that."

Harry reached for her hand. She let him take it.

"I'm sorry too."

"For what?"

"For thinking the worst of you."

"You were supposed to."

"I know."

"For hating me."

"You were supposed to."

"I know."

Dracena smiled through tears.

"Stop saying that."

"Then stop saying things I know."

She laughed. Harry did too.

Dracena looked at him.

Harry noticed.

Harry looked at her.

She noticed.

"Oh." Ron muttered.

Hermione elbowed him.

Dracena leaned forward towards Harry...

Every light went out.

Darkness swallowed Hogwarts.

Hermione immediately shouted: "**PERICULUM!**"

Red light shot upward.

Then the night exploded.

Shouts.
Spells.
Screaming.

Green.
Red.
Blue.
Gold.

The grounds filled with people.

Hundreds.

Then THOUSANDS.

Harry couldn't understand where they'd come from.

Dracena could. "Disillusionment charms!"

The outer field erupted with figures.

Death Eaters. Far more than anyone had expected. The first Hogwarts defenders were overwhelmed almost immediately.

Harry saw students disarmed.
Staff surrounded.
Somebody shouted for everyone to fall back.
They couldn't. They were surrounded. Within minutes, the grounds belonged to Voldemort. Harry and Dracena had been separated from Ron and Hermione.

The crowd parted. Voldemort walked through. Several Death Eaters followed. Harry raised his wand. Dracena stood beside him.

Voldemort smiled.

"Harry Potter."

Harry said nothing.

"How appropriate."

He looked around at Hogwarts.

"Do you see it?"

Harry glared.

"The old world ending. The new world rising. My world."

"Do you practice these speeches?" Harry interrupted.

Voldemort stopped. Dracena made a tiny choking noise.

Harry shrugged. "You always seem to have one."

Voldemort's smile vanished. "The world will remember tonight."

"Over my dead body."

The smile returned. "Oh, Harry." Voldemort raised his wand. "I'm *so* glad you said that."

Harry attacked first. Of course he did.

Dracena swore.

Voldemort was faster. Harry blocked, and then countered.

Voldemort moved

Harry dodged and moved

He fought bravely. And stupidly.

Voldemort kept giving ground.

Harry followed. Dracena saw it before Harry did.

"Harry!"

Too late.

Voldemort smiled. Harry realized. *Trap*. Three Death Eaters moved behind him.

Harry spun. For one terrible second his instinct screamed: **Attack.**

And suddenly he thought of Dracena. *Potter, 'do something' is not a plan*.

Harry smiled. Voldemort's expression changed.

Harry retreated, and moved sideways.

One Death Eater fired a spell. Harry ducked.

The Killing Curse glanced off Voldemort's wards and struck another Death Eater.

Harry shouted, " **CONFRIGO** !"

The trap collapsed into confusion.

Dracena saw it. Despite everything, she grinned. "About bloody time, Potter." she said to herself.

Then Voldemort attacked. The duel became something else. Harry couldn't beat him. He knew it. Voldemort knew it. Voldemort drove him backward. Harry stumbled. His wand came up.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

Harry's spell met Voldemorts. The spells collided. Harry screamed. The force nearly tore the wand from his hand.

Voldemort pushed. Harry pushed back.

The point where the spells met began moving toward Harry. Slowly. Inch by inch.

Harry planted both feet. His arms shook.

"No."

Voldemort smiled. The green light of the Killing Curse inched closer to Harry.

Harry's vision blurred. "No." he whispered.

Closer. He could feel heat on his face.

His knees buckled. He thought of Ron.
Hermione.
Hagrid.
His parents.
Hogwarts.

Dracena.

Out of nowhere, a hand touched his. Harry gasped in surprise. Another hand closed around the wand. Platinum blonde hair brushed his cheek.

Dracena stood beside him. "Move over, Potter."

Harry almost laughed. "Little busy."

"I noticed."

She pressed herself against his side. Her fingers wrapped around his.

For one strange instant, the battle disappeared.
Harry could feel her breathing.
Her heart hammering.
Her hand trembling.
She was terrified.
Dracena Malfoy was absolutely terrified, and she was here anyway.

She turned her face and kissed his cheek.

"Together?"

Harry looked at her. "Together."

They pushed. Harry's spell stopped retreating.

Voldemort's smile disappeared.

Harry felt Dracena's hand tighten. He didn't know where his magic ended and hers began.
Didn't know whose strength he was feeling.
Didn't care.
Everything outside them dimmed.

The screaming disappeared.
The battlefield disappeared.
There was only Dracena beside him.
Her shoulder against his.
Her fingers around his.
Her breath against his cheek.

Six years.
A robe shop.
A train.
A duel.
A broom.
A hippogriff.
A photograph.
A bathroom.

A Christmas present.
A thousand stupid arguments.

Harry pushed. Dracena pushed with him.

Harry's spell lurched forward.

Voldemort's eyes widened. "No."

A little closer...

"No!"

Dracena screamed. Harry screamed with her. " **EXPELLIARMUS** !"

Voldemort's spell shattered, and his wand ripped from his hand. It flew high into the air.

For one perfect second, nobody moved.

The horizon lit up. Hundreds of spells streaked across the grounds.

Aurors. Ministry forces. Witches and wizards from across Britain.

The reinforcements had arrived. The Death Eaters broke into a run. Harry barely noticed. His wand fell from his hand. Dracena caught him. Or Harry caught her. They ended up holding each other.

Harry laughed. Dracena started crying. Then Harry did too.

"You're horrible." Harry whispered.

Dracena laughed through her tears. "I still love you."

Dracena stopped. Harry looked at her. Dracena touched his face.

"I love you, Harry Potter."

Harry smiled. "Yeah."

Dracena frowned. " *Yeah?* "

Harry laughed. There she was.

"I love you too, Dracena Malfoy."

"Better."

She kissed him. This time Harry didn't pull away.

The battle continued around them.

People shouted.
Spells flashed.
Somewhere behind them, Ron yelled something Harry couldn't hear and Hermione told him to shut up.

Harry didn't care.
For six years, Harry Potter and Dracena Malfoy had argued about nearly everything.

They would undoubtedly continue doing so, but that could wait until morning. For now, Harry kissed the Slytherin girl he'd once been absolutely certain he couldn't possibly like.



The Epilogue

THREE YEARS LATER



Lucius Malfoy had endured many unpleasant things in his life. He had endured Ministry investigations, political reversals, financial crises, and the indignity of watching men of questionable ancestry rise to positions of considerable influence.

He had endured Lord Voldemort.

He had endured his daughter's adolescence.

He had even endured several Muggle films, although he would deny enjoying *The Empire Strikes Back* until his dying breath.

But there were limits. And Harry Potter was sitting at his dinner table. Again.

Worse, Dracena appeared to be enjoying herself.

Lucius looked across the table. Potter was laughing at something his daughter had said. Not the polite laughter of a guest attempting to ingratiate himself with his hosts. Genuine laughter. Dracena was laughing too. Lucius found this particularly irritating. He had spent years attempting to raise a daughter who understood the dignity of the Malfoy name. He had provided the finest education, the best tutors, a magnificent home, and every opportunity to develop the poise and sophistication appropriate to her station.

And somehow she had developed a taste for Harry Potter. .

Dracena looked at him.

"Father."

"What?"

"You're staring."

"I am observing."

Harry grinned. Lucius narrowed his eyes.

"Something amusing, Potter?"

"No, sir."

"Then kindly refrain from looking amused."

Harry made an effort. It was not successful. Dracena sighed.

"This is going to be a very long dinner."

The argument began with a newspaper. It usually did. Lucius had mentioned a Ministry proposal concerning several collections of privately

held magical artifacts. The proposed legislation would grant the Ministry authority to acquire certain historically significant magical objects and research materials for preservation and public study.

Harry thought this sounded reasonable. Lucius thought it sounded like theft. Dracena had initially hoped the discussion would end there. Unfortunately, she had fallen in love with a Gryffindor.

"What exactly is wrong with making old magical knowledge available to people?" Harry asked.

Lucius put down his fork. "Nothing."

Harry blinked. "Nothing?"

"Provided its owners consent."

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"If they won't consent, nobody else gets to learn from it."

Lucius regarded him.

"Yes, Potter. That is generally how ownership works."

Harry sighed. "You're talking about hoarding knowledge."

Lucius's expression changed. Dracena recognized it.

Oh, here we go.

"Hoarding." Lucius repeated.

"Yes."

"An interesting choice of words."

"Well, what would you call it?"

"Stewardship."

Harry frowned. "That's a rather convenient word."

"Words frequently become inconvenient when one understands what they mean."

"Father." Dracena warned. She idly fingered the band on her left ring finger, feeling the comfort of the enormous cluster of gems.

Lucius waved a hand. "No, no. I am genuinely interested." He turned back to Harry. "Tell me, Potter. Where do you suppose new magic comes from?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

"New spells. New enchantments. New magical techniques. Where do you suppose they originate?"

"People invent them."

"Astounding."

"Father." Dracena said, with a warning tone.

Lucius ignored her. "Who, Potter? Who invents them?"

"Researchers, I suppose."

"Employed by whom?"

Harry hesitated. "Hogwarts? The Ministry? Private businesses?"

"Some. Certainly." Lucius leaned back. "But historically, much magical research has been conducted by individuals and families. Sometimes over generations."

Harry considered this. "All right."

"I have learned..." Lucius began, "...your Muggle world has enormous institutions devoted to research. Universities. Corporations. Government laboratories. Thousands of people collaborating, sharing facilities, funding experiments."

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"We have relatively little of that."

"You have Hogwarts."

"A school."

"The Ministry."

"A bureaucracy."

"St Mungo's."

"A hospital."

Harry smiled faintly. "You're very difficult to satisfy."

"So I've been told."

Dracena made a small noise into her glass.

Lucius continued. "Imagine a family discovers a useful enchantment. Perhaps something as simple as a charm that prevents wood from rotting. They teach it to their children. Their children improve it. A century later, a descendant discovers that a variation can preserve certain medicinal ingredients."

Harry nodded. "All right."

"Another generation discovers that the same principle can preserve delicate magical instruments." Lucius spread his hands. "Three hundred years of experimentation. Failures. Improvements. Discoveries. All preserved within one family."

"All right." Harry repeated.

"Now imagine the Ministry arrives and declares that this knowledge represents an unacceptable concentration of magical resources."

Harry frowned. "I don't think that's quite what they're saying."

"Then what are they saying?"

"That something useful shouldn't necessarily be kept away from everyone else."

"By what right?"

Harry thought.

Lucius continued before he could answer. "Because other people wish to use it?"

"Well..."

"Because the family is wealthy?"

"That's not..."

"Because some Ministry committee has decided that possessing something valuable is inherently suspicious?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I don't agree with that."

Lucius stopped. "You don't?"

"No."

Dracena looked up.

Harry continued. "If someone invents something, they should be allowed to benefit from it."

Lucius regarded him with renewed interest. "Indeed."

"Fred and George, for example."

Lucius closed his eyes. "Must we?"

Dracena grinned. "Oh, Father, this should be good."

Harry leaned forward. "They've invented all sorts of things. Joke products, mostly, but some are genuinely useful."

"I am aware."

"Their Darkness Powder helped the Aurors during the war."

Lucius's jaw tightened. "I am painfully aware."

Harry caught the expression. For a moment, the memory of that war passed between them. Neither pursued it.

Lucius continued. "An excellent example, actually. The Weasley twins developed those products through their own ingenuity. They invested their own money. They took risks. They experimented."

"And blew things up." Harry added.

"Frequently, I imagine."

Dracena laughed.

"Sometimes intentionally."

"Indeed."

Lucius turned back to Harry.

"Would you approve of the Ministry confiscating their inventions?"

"No."

"Would you approve of a committee declaring that the twins had accumulated too much valuable magical knowledge and therefore must surrender it for the public good?"

"No."

"Would you approve of compelling them to share their methods with competitors?"

Harry considered. "Probably not."

"Why?"

"Because they invented them."

"Precisely." Lucius took a sip of wine. "Now suppose the inventions are three hundred years old."

Harry frowned. "What?"

"The twins are long dead. Their descendants maintain the business. Perhaps they've improved the original inventions. Perhaps they've discovered entirely new applications."

"All right."

"At what point does that knowledge stop belonging to their family?"

Harry opened his mouth, then stopped. Dracena smiled.

Lucius noticed. "Something amusing, my dear?"

"Nothing, Father."

Harry thought for a moment. "I don't know."

Lucius inclined his head. "A perfectly respectable answer."

Harry looked up. "Really?"

"Yes. I wish more people would give it."

Dracena almost laughed. Harry grinned. They grinned at each other.

"Consider, Potter, that inheritance is not merely the transfer of wealth. It can also be the transfer of obligations."

Harry frowned. "Obligations?"

"Certainly. To preserve. To maintain. To improve when possible. To avoid squandering what previous generations created."

Lucius glanced toward Dracena. "My daughter stands to inherit a great many things. Not merely property."

Dracena looked at her father.

He continued. "She inherits a history. Traditions. Knowledge. Responsibilities."

Harry nodded slowly. "I think I understand that better than I used to."

Lucius looked surprised. "Do you?"

"Yes."

Harry glanced at Dracena "She showed me some of it."

Dracena smiled. "The tapestries. Among other things."

Harry looked back at Lucius. "I used to think all those old family traditions were just ways for rich wizards to congratulate themselves for being rich."

Lucius looked offended. "How predictably vulgar."

"Yes, well." Harry shrugged. "I was wrong about some of it."

Dracena's smile widened.

Lucius noticed. Something in his expression softened. Only slightly.

Harry continued. "But there's something I still don't understand."

"Naturally."

"If a family discovers something useful, why keep it secret?"

Lucius considered. "Sometimes because they wish to profit from it."

Harry nodded. "Right. That makes sense, I guess."

"Sometimes because they believe others would misuse it."

Harry nodded thoughtfully.

"And sometimes, Potter, because the discovery should never have been made in the first place."

Harry stopped.

Dracena looked at her father. "What do you mean?"

Lucius put down his wineglass. "Have you ever heard of the Vesper Curse?"

Harry shook his head. Dracena shook hers too.

"Good." Lucius leaned back. "Approximately two centuries ago, a member of an old wizarding family discovered a method of transferring

enchantments from one object to another."

Harry frowned. "That sounds useful."

"It was intended to be."

"Intended?"

"The researcher discovered that certain protective charms could be transferred between objects without being recast. A remarkable achievement."

Dracena leaned forward. "That would have tremendous applications."

"Indeed."

"What happened?"

Lucius looked at her. "The enchantment did not distinguish reliably between protective magic and curses."

Harry frowned. "So it transferred curses too?"

"Yes."

"That's unfortunate."

"Extremely."

Lucius paused. "Then the researcher discovered something considerably worse."

Neither Harry nor Dracena spoke.

"Under certain circumstances, an enchanted object could transfer its properties to another without the caster's intervention. That object could then transfer them again."

Harry stared. "Like an infection."

"Precisely."

Dracena's expression changed. "Oh."

Lucius nodded. "Imagine a curse capable of propagating through other enchanted objects. A cursed door infecting the protective charms on a house. The house infecting everything inside it. An enchanted carriage carrying the curse into another household."

Harry stopped smiling. "What happened?"

"The family destroyed the research."

"All of it?"

"As much as they could find."

Harry looked thoughtful. "Did they tell the Ministry?"

"No."

He frowned. "Why not?"

Lucius looked at him for a long moment. "Which Ministry?"

"What?"

"Which particular Ministry would you entrust with such knowledge?"

Harry shrugged. "The Ministry at the time, I suppose."

"And the Ministry twenty years later?"

Harry hesitated.

Lucius continued. "Suppose a responsible Minister establishes a secure research facility. Appoints competent people. Establishes safeguards."

"That sounds reasonable."

"It does."

Lucius took a sip of wine. "Then the Minister dies."

Harry said nothing.

"His successor appoints different people. A researcher retires. Another copies the documents. Someone decides the original restrictions were

excessive. Perhaps the research is rediscovered by someone who believes himself cleverer than his predecessors." Lucius spread his hands. "And suddenly a discovery that one family had the sense to destroy becomes the foundation of a catastrophe."

Harry considered this. "But what if the family was wrong?"

Lucius nodded. "A legitimate question."

Dracena glanced between them.

Harry continued. "What if someone eventually figured out how to make it safe?"

"Then a potentially valuable discovery has been lost."

"You're comfortable with that?"

"Yes."

Harry blinked.

Lucius leaned forward. "Sometimes one must choose between preserving something valuable and preventing something terrible." He paused. "I would rather lose a useful enchantment than preserve a dangerous one merely because I cannot bear the thought of destroying knowledge."

Harry thought about that. Dracena looked at her father with an expression Harry couldn't quite identify.

"All right." Harry said finally.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "All right?"

"I can see your point."

"How extraordinary."

"But."

"Ah."

Dracena sighed.

Harry leaned forward.

"How do we know the family actually destroyed the research?"

Lucius said nothing.

"How do we know they didn't keep it for themselves?"

The silence changed.

Dracena slowly put down her fork.

Harry continued.

"You're saying we shouldn't trust the Ministry because eventually someone might misuse the knowledge."

"Yes."

"But families change too."

Lucius's expression hardened.

"Explain."

"People die. Children inherit things. Sometimes the next generation isn't as responsible as the last."

Lucius glanced briefly at Dracena. She stared pointedly at her plate.

Harry continued. "Sometimes a family that promises to protect dangerous knowledge might decide to use it."

Lucius's eyes narrowed. "Choose your words carefully, Potter."

Harry met his gaze. "I'm not accusing you of keeping that particular curse."

"How reassuring."

"I'm saying the argument works both ways."

Lucius said nothing.

"You don't trust the Ministry because the wrong people might eventually get control of something dangerous."

"Correct."

"Neither do I."

That surprised him.

Harry continued. "But I don't automatically trust a family because their great-grandfather was trustworthy."

Silence. Lucius looked at Harry for a long time.

Then he nodded. Very slightly. "A legitimate objection."

Dracena nearly dropped her fork.

Harry stared. "Really?"

"Yes, Potter. Really."

Lucius looked irritated. "Do you imagine I have never considered the possibility that hereditary stewardship might fail?"

Harry smiled faintly. "Well, you don't usually advertise it."

"Because recognizing a danger is not the same thing as accepting someone else's proposed solution."

Harry considered that.

Lucius continued. "And who, precisely, would decide which families were sufficiently responsible to retain their knowledge?"

"I don't know."

"Ministry officials?"

"Not necessarily."

"Independent scholars?"

"Maybe."

"Appointed by whom?"

Harry frowned. "That's the problem, isn't it?"

"Precisely."

Harry thought for a moment. "Maybe you need some kind of independent review. Not necessarily access to all the knowledge, but enough to know what's being kept and whether it's dangerous."

Lucius looked skeptical. "And what prevents the reviewers themselves from becoming a danger?"

"I don't know."

"Then your solution has merely moved the problem."

Harry nodded. "Possibly."

Lucius seemed surprised by the admission.

Harry continued. "But your solution leaves it entirely in the hands of whoever inherited the family vault."

"True."

"And you don't know whether their grandchildren will be responsible either."

Lucius considered. "No."

A long silence followed. Dracena watched her father.

He wasn't angry. He was thinking. That was new. Not that Father didn't think, obviously. She had rarely seen him seriously consider an argument from someone he regarded as socially inferior. Especially Potter.

Finally, Lucius spoke. "There is a distinction, Potter, between acknowledging that a system is imperfect and concluding that its replacement would be better."

Harry nodded. "That's fair."

"And there is a distinction between private ownership and arbitrary exclusion."

Harry blinked. "That's what I've been saying."

"Yes." Lucius looked faintly annoyed. "I am aware."

Dracena smiled.

Lucius continued. "I am prepared to concede that some families have confused the preservation of knowledge with the preservation of privilege."

Harry looked at him. "Really?"

"Do stop sounding astonished."

"Sorry."

" **Some** families." Lucius repeated pointedly.

Harry grinned. "Of course."

"But I am not prepared to concede that the Ministry has an inherent right to seize whatever it decides would be useful to the public."

Harry nodded. "Neither am I."

Lucius stopped. "What?"

Harry shrugged. "I said I don't think the Ministry should simply be able to take everything."

"Then what have we been arguing about for the last half hour?"

Dracena burst out laughing.

Harry smiled. "The details."

Lucius stared at him. Then, to Dracena's absolute astonishment, he laughed. "Merlin help me."

Dracena wiped her eyes.

"Oh, this is wonderful."

Both men looked at her.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You've spent half an hour arguing and discovered you actually agree about something."

Lucius sniffed. "Do not exaggerate, Dracena."

Harry laughed. "Wouldn't dream of it."

The conversation continued through dessert.

The discussion somehow led to an argument about patenting spells, which led to an argument about whether magical techniques should expire into public use after a certain number of years, which led to Lucius explaining several ancient disputes between wizarding families.

Harry discovered that some of these disputes had continued for centuries.

"You're joking."

"I assure you I am not."

"Three hundred years?"

"Approximately."

"Over a charm for keeping soup warm?"

"A very sophisticated charm."

"It's soup."

"Potter, you are missing the point."

Dracena laughed so hard she had to put down her spoon. At one point Lucius admitted that the Weasley twins were talented inventors. This produced such an expression of astonishment on Harry's face that Lucius immediately regretted saying it.

"I said talented, Potter. Not respectable."

"Right."

"Nor tasteful."

"Of course."

"Nor particularly well-bred."

"Naturally."

Dracena grinned.

"But talented."

Lucius glared at his daughter.

"Yes, Dracena. Talented."

Harry looked delighted.

"I can't wait to tell George."

"You will do no such thing."

"Oh, I absolutely will."

"Potter."

"He's going to frame it."

Dracena dissolved into laughter again.

Lucius wondered, not for the first time, whether allowing Harry Potter into his home had been a terrible mistake.

Then he noticed something. Harry was listening. Not merely waiting for his opportunity to argue, but listening.
Asking questions.
Occasionally disagreeing.
Occasionally conceding a point.
Lucius had expected Potter to be reckless, stubborn, sentimental, and thoroughly convinced of his own righteousness.

He was, admittedly, all of those things. But there was something else. The boy could change his mind. Not easily, not completely, but he could do it.

When Lucius explained something Harry hadn't considered, Harry didn't immediately dismiss it merely because Lucius Malfoy had said it. Lucius found that unexpectedly agreeable. He would never have admitted it during dinner.

Naturally.

Later, Dracena excused herself from the table. She slowly worked herself out of her chair, carefully protecting her swollen belly as she sat up to help her mother with something upstairs.

Harry suspected this was a conspiracy. He suspected it even more strongly when she kissed his cheek and whispered: "Behave."

Harry smiled. "Me?"

"Especially you."

She looked toward her father. "And you."

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Behave, Father."

"Dracena."

She smiled sweetly.

"Love you."

Then she disappeared with her mother.

Lucius watched her go. "Extraordinary child."

Harry smiled. "Yes."

"Stubborn."

"Very."

"Argumentative."

"Absolutely."

"Entirely too convinced of her own intelligence."

Harry grinned. "Reminds me of someone."

Lucius looked at him. "Be careful, Potter."

Harry laughed. Lucius poured himself a brandy. He offered Harry one. Harry declined.

For several minutes they sat in comfortable silence. It was an entirely new experience. Lucius considered the young man across from him.

Harry Potter. The boy who had become famous for surviving the Dark Lord. The boy who had repeatedly interfered with plans Lucius had considered essential. The boy whose convictions Lucius found naive, whose manners he found occasionally appalling, and whose choice of friends he continued to regard with considerable skepticism.

The boy his daughter loved.

Lucius looked toward the doorway.

He remembered Dracena at sixteen, standing in his study.

Terrified.
Defiant.
Telling him he would never strike her again.
Telling him she loved her family.
Telling him she didn't want another name.

"*I belong to me*."

He remembered her lying on the floor.
Blood on her face.
Barely conscious.
He remembered Voldemort smiling.
Lucius closed his eyes briefly.
There were things he would never forgive.

Things he would never forget.
And things he would never apologize for.

He opened his eyes. Potter was looking at the fire.

Lucius cleared his throat. "Mr Potter."

Harry turned. "Yes, sir?"

"I must confess something."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "That sounds ominous."

"Don't be impertinent."

"Sorry."

Lucius considered his brandy. "I unexpectedly enjoyed dinner this evening."

Harry looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yes."

Lucius paused. "I expected..."

Harry smiled. "You expected an argument."

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yes, Mr Potter. I certainly expected one of those."

Harry laughed.

Lucius allowed himself a small smile. "What I didn't expect was to *enjoy* it."

Harry looked sheepish. "Yeah, Mr Malfoy. I did too."

"Lucius."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"You may call me Lucius." Harry stared at him.

Lucius sighed. "It appears you have become a part of this family, despite my previous wishes to the contrary."

Harry's mouth twitched. "Previous wishes?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "Don't push it, Potter."

Harry smiled. "Harry."

For a moment, Lucius simply stared at him. Then, very slowly, the corner of his mouth rose. "Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Lucius."

Lucius rose and left the room.

Harry sat alone for a moment, smiling faintly at the fire.

He had not suddenly come to agree with the man's politics, his prejudices, or his conception of the wizarding world. But Harry had learned something that evening.

Lucius had too. And perhaps that was enough. For tonight.

About the Author



Sensurround Q. Catgirl is the nom de plume of @ShamashAran on X, who values her privacy, largely because it allows her to write about whatever she pleases without having to explain herself to people who might recognize her at the grocery store, or at work.

She writes about a wide variety of subjects, many of which are virtually guaranteed to make someone angry. This is not necessarily her intention, although she admits it is sometimes a pleasant side effect.