The Bravest Man

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The Bravest Man

by SapphireQuill

Summary

With the possibilities magic offers, you never know what might turn up on your doorstep.

Notes

Author/Artist LJ Name: sapphirequill
Prompter: seerstella
Prompt Number: 83
Title: The Bravest Man
Pairing(s): Harry/Draco, Lucius/Narcissa, and James/Lily are it, aside from a surprise next-Gen het pairing mentioned briefly in the epilogue. There are other canon and non-canon pairings mentioned in passing.
Summary: With the possibilities magic offers, you never know what might turn up on your doorstep.
Rating: PG
Disclaimer: All Harry Potter characters herein are the property of J.K. Rowling and Bloomsbury/Scholastic. No copyright infringement is intended.
Warning(s): References to off-screen child abuse, angst, fluff, non-H/D character deaths mentioned in the epilogue.
Epilogue compliant? EWE (Most of the story takes place only a few years after the war.)
Word Count: 10,100
Author's Notes: Prompter, I fear I may have inverted your preferred angst/humour ratio; if so, I apologize! Also, Betas and Mods deserve ALL the chocolate.
It was a warm and sunny summer afternoon, made all the more pleasant by the company. Instead of her sister, who’d been nasty and resentful ever since the day Lily had received her Hogwarts letter, she was at the park with Sev. Not Severus, the Slytherin boy who only spoke to her when it was absolutely necessary, but Sev, the boy who’d first made her believe that magic could be real.

They were lying on the grass together on the little hill that had been their special place the year previous, and it was almost like the horrible parts of the past year had never happened — no awful housemates, no house rivalry — but Lily could participate in the conversation now, rather than simply listen in amazement.

It wasn’t completely perfect because the swelling of black, blue, yellow, and green that surrounded Sev’s eye was a glaring reminder that horrible things happened here, too.

“You know what we should do?”

He looked over at her, turning his head just a bit — he was trying to protect her from the sight of the bruising, she knew — but he didn’t speak.

“We should invent a potion to make you younger.”

He barked a laugh that had no humour in it. “According to Witch Weekly, it already exists, or haven’t you seen the adverts for the cosmetics line Celestina Warbeck’s promoting?”

“No, not that sort of thing — a potion that can really make you younger, turn you back into a child.”

He sat up and gawked at her. “I’m counting the minutes until I can leave; why would I want to deliberately stay longer?”

“No!” she said, sitting up as well and reaching out for his arm, in case he tried to leave. “Not for now... so that you can have a chance to do it right, have the childhood you should have had this time.”

He looked as though he might be tempted for a moment then shrugged apathetically. “It wouldn’t matter. There’s no way to guarantee that the same thing wouldn’t happen again. And probably no one would want to anyway.”

“I’d want to,” she said earnestly. “I’ll be older then and could make sure you’d be safe. I’d do it now if I could.” She’d never told him she’d asked her parents if there was some way they could take Sev in or that they’d cried as they tried to explain why it wasn’t possible. She never would.

Draco was trying to remember when dinner with his parents had become more stressful for him than for Harry. Shortly after our third anniversary, he decided. That seemed to be when his parents — and nearly everyone else — had decided that it was time he and Harry become parents themselves. Since then, any gathering that included extended family or close friends was an opportunity for them to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and to castigate the one they perceived to be responsible, namely Draco.

The senior Malfoys felt they had a stake in the outcome that was larger than most, and they’d left subtlety behind months ago. It made Draco wonder why he’d bothered to negotiate for their weekly dinners at all, especially given, he realized in disgruntlement, it had been a rather long time since he’d enjoyed the benefits Harry had negotiated in exchange.
“Don’t you agree, Draco?”

“I’m sorry, Mother?”

She gave him a look that used to promise broom-confiscations and no dessert. He’d seen it so frequently lately that it was rather less effective.

“Don’t you think it would be lovely if you and Harry were to have a child this year? Of an age to go to Hogwarts with Blaise and Parvati’s youngest? They’ve decided it’s to be their last, you know.” She gave a laugh that was as light as it was insincere. “I suppose that’s reasonable, as it’s their third, isn’t it?”

“It’s their fourth,” Draco corrected unnecessarily, since she knew full well how many children they’d had. “Mother, I assure you, if we decide to have children, you’ll be amongst the very first people we tell.”

He received a hard look before she turned to Harry with an entreaty one. “Harry, dear, please talk some sense into him.”

“Narcissa, Draco is more than capable of making his own decisions.” Harry’s tone was careful and mild, and Draco’s hand clenched involuntarily around the stem of his wine glass.

During the dessert course, when Harry excused himself to answer to the Floo, Draco braced himself. No matter how heavy-handed their comments were when Harry was present, they were still polite; it wouldn’t do to alienate Harry Potter, after all, not after all the effort that went into their reconciliation. When Draco was left to face his parents alone, however, they were far less diplomatic, and knowing Harry wouldn’t be long, they wasted no time in confronting their son.

“What do you mean by delaying, Draco?” The cold disapproval in Lucius’s voice was unpleasantly familiar. “You have to understand that having a child together is the only way to cement your position.”

Because clearly Harry wouldn’t keep me on my own merits, and my highest priority is being the husband of the Boy Who Lived to Save the Wizarding World, Draco continued silently.

His mother, at least, recognized and tried to deflect the insult. “Darling, I do remember how bothersome it is when parents pry into a marriage, and we don’t mean to meddle, but you’re obviously stressed.” She paused in case Draco wanted to try to deny that; he didn’t. “Regardless of the state of current politics, our society is very traditional, and people won’t believe Harry is committed to your relationship until you have a family. So long as you and Harry are without children, gossip will have the two of you only minutes from a permanent separation.”

“Not to mention you’ll be the end of three family lines between you,” Lucius added bitterly.

Draco raised a hand to stop his mother from providing a gentler variation of his father's words. “I understand your arguments, and, to a certain extent, I even agree with them, but you’re forgetting the most important one: this is our marriage, and it is our family, whether it’s comprised of two or twenty.” He heard Harry in the hall and, grateful that his timing allowed Draco the last word, he changed the subject.

"How is your work with the hospital charity, Mother?"

"Oh, we’re terribly busy, as usual. Actually, at our meeting next week, we'll begin planning the Anniversary Festival; perhaps you’d care to join me, Harry?” Regardless of the likelihood of her convincing them to have children, she was determined to get Harry out of the house. Since Harry
had plenty to occupy himself but wasn’t willing to share what it was he did at home all day, it was a frustrating exercise for everyone. He demurred, as he always did, and Draco’s parents left not long afterwards.

Once they had, however, Draco decided it was time for a confrontation. “She’d leave you alone if she knew, you do realize that?”

“Knew what?”

Draco couldn’t tell if Harry was being facetious. “If she knew you weren’t sitting at home doing nothing all day.” Harry’s decision to keep his writing career a secret from the general population was sound, but his determination to keep it from their friends and family as well was causing needless tension. “They’re worried about you.”

Harry’s response was heavy with scepticism. “Lucius is worried about me?”

"Not particularly, no.” Normally, Draco would have tried for a more tactful answer, but he wanted this conversation to be honest — painfully so, if necessary. "But my mother does, and Molly, and the rest of the Weasleys — the rest of the wizarding world for that matter. My mother knows better, but the rest think I’m some sort of Svengali, keeping you secluded in the house and restricting contact with anyone but me. You need to stop letting them assume I’m the villain.” Draco smiled to soften the retort. “It hinders your campaign to make people believe I’ve reformed.”

Harry returned his smile, which was as tremulous as Draco suspected his own to be, but he didn’t reply otherwise. That, Draco had learned shortly after they began exploring the possibility that they might become friends, usually meant that Harry didn’t agree but didn’t want to fight. It was also his standard response when this topic was raised, so Draco pushed a little more. “It’s not fair to me, and it’s not fair to you. You deserve their pride.”

Harry nodded this time, reluctantly, and Draco took that to mean he’d think about it and retreated, on that subject at least; unfortunately, it was the lesser of his frustrations. The larger issue…. “You did it again.”

Harry stared at him blankly, and Draco suppressed a groan of exasperation. “We’ve talked about this. Everyone assumes I’m the one who doesn’t want children, punishing poor Harry Potter, who so desperately wants the large family he lacked as a child, and when I try to present a united front, you say it’s my decision.”

“It is! I’m not forcing you.”

“Harry,” Draco sighed, “Your alternative is that I leave. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not.”

He sounded as though he meant it, which is something, Draco supposed. “Then stop pushing me away.” Draco put his hands on Harry’s shoulders, forcing him to look at Draco. “Would I like children? Yes. Do I want them more than I want to spend my life with you? No. It’s a bit difficult for either of us to get pregnant accidentally, so trust me, and speak up next time. I don’t expect you to make an announcement in the paper, just... don’t wave it off when people assume I’m the one who forcing the decision on you.” In retrospect, Draco realized he could have phrased that better.

Harry pulled abruptly out of Draco’s reach. “What am I supposed to say?” He asked, his words loud and sharp. “No, I don’t want children because I was raised as a house elf instead of a child? That I have no concept of reasonable limits — something that was made worse each time I was endangered
trying to fulfill the ridiculous expectations set by people who claimed to love me? I have no idea how to be a father! Hell, I’m not even certain I even know what love is!”

Draco stared at him for several moments, until it was painfully clear that Harry was finished yelling, and his own words were tight and thin. “I thought it’s what we shared.” He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, hoping the pressure would prevent both the additional words and the tears that threatened. He took a long, deep breath and spoke quietly. “I’ll return in the morning to pack my things.” Or send one of his parents’ elves, a far more sensible plan.

“How can you not know how to be a father?” Harry was just as incredulous. “I thought that’s what we shared. You know what love is.”

Draco stared at him for several moments, until it was painfully clear that Harry was finished yelling, and his own words were tight and thin. “I thought it’s what we shared.” He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose, hoping the pressure would prevent both the additional words and the tears that threatened. He took a long, deep breath and spoke quietly. “I’ll return in the morning to pack my things.” Or send one of his parents’ elves, a far more sensible plan.

“Draco, wait—” The wards chimed to announce someone at front door. The both glared at the door as though it were at fault, and no knock followed, so they ignored it.

“Listen, I—” Harry started again, but the wards resumed, increasing in volume and frequency to indicate that someone was still at the door. After so many years under Fidelius, the house couldn’t suddenly reappear, so Harry had used a modified Disillusionment Charm in it. Unfortunately, it was vulnerable if people were too long in front of the door. “Don’t go yet, please. Wait until I come back.” He left the room quickly, leaving Draco only a few minutes – perhaps only seconds – to make a decision.

As ever, Draco’s head and heart were at odds.

When he’d been ordered to assassinate Dumbledore and to repair the vanishing cabinet, he’d known it was wrong, but his heart was certain it was the only option if he wanted to save his parents. Tonight, it was the reverse — he knew, logically, that leaving was the best decision, but it felt so wrong. He feared the consequences would be just as disastrous for him this time.

He had the Floo powder in hand when Harry called him, panicked.

“Draco!” It took a great deal to rattle Harry Potter, and Draco had dropped the powder before he’d even thought about doing it. It had been years since they’d last been attacked by anyone bitter about Voldemort’s defeat or trying to win the allegiance of the Elder wand, but Draco moved quickly and silently to the front hall.

The front door was open slightly, and Draco drew his wand to cast a one-way transparency spell before he pulled it fully open.

Expecting to see Harry engaged in a battle of spells or words, what he saw instead was unexpected: Harry, crouched on the floor, was murmuring to a crying toddler. Draco returned his wand to its sheath and opened the door.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly.

“I think I scared him when I yelled for you.”

Draco limited his response to the eyebrow-raised-in-disbelief that it deserved and kneeled next to them but kept his voice soft. “Who is he?”

“I have no idea.” Harry replied. “I found him here, huddled on the stoop.” The child was small, even for his age, Draco thought, though it was hard to be certain, crouched over as he was. His knees were tucked up inside his nightshirt, and his face was pressed against them. Dark hair covered the rest of his head. Both he and Harry had the sense not to try to touch him and to wait until he was nearly calm before speaking.

“Hello.” Draco tried to convey friendly and trustworthy in a single word, but a tightening of the child’s shoulders suggested he was unsuccessful. “My name is Draco, and this is Harry.”
Solemnly, the child nodded once but didn’t lift his head or speak.

“Where are your parents?”

He shook his head.

“Did they bring you here?”

He shook his head again and mumbled. It was difficult to be certain, but Draco thought he’d said, “Lady here.”

“Your mum left you here?”

“NOT Mama. Lady.” The child looked up to issue the correction, and Draco was confronted by dark eyes glaring from a pale face. There was something familiar in the child’s countenance, an expression Draco was certain he’d seen before. While he was distracted trying to place it, Harry took up the questioning. “What’s your name?”

The boy considered it for a long moment but eventually decided to answer. “Seph.”

“Joseph?” Harry guessed.

“No, not Doset, Seph.”

“Seth?” Having learned his lesson, Harry directed his question to Draco and spoke quietly. Not quietly enough, clearly, as the child glared again, though Harry didn’t seem to notice.

“Maybe,” Draco replied. That earned Draco a glare as well, one that Harry caught, but before the child or Harry took up a quarrel, Draco tried a distraction. “Why don’t we dry your clothes, hmm? Would you like that?” The weather couldn’t be described as raining as it wasn’t more than a heavy mist, but Seth — they had to call him something — had been outside long enough that he was nearly soaked. Before Draco could draw his wand, however, Harry shook his head. He’s right, Draco realized. The child could be a Muggle. “Would you like to move inside to the sitting room? There’s a warm fire and comfortable places to sit. We could probably even find a cup of cocoa. Would you like that?”

Black eyes narrowed suspiciously, but after several moments, the boy gave a careful nod. He stood on his own, though it took multiple attempts, and his steps were unsteady. Before he’d made it three feet into the hall, it was evident he was injured.

Draco reached out a hand to stop him, though he stopped before he touched the child. “It looks like it hurts to walk.”

Seth stared at him for a long moment before nodding briefly.

“Would you like to be carried? Just to the sofa there?” Draco pointed to the sitting room, the door to which was fortunately open to reveal the piece of furniture in question.

The little boy looked to Harry, almost as though he were gauging permission. When Harry nodded encouragingly, Seth raised his arms to Harry in a silent request to be lifted.

Draco would have snickered but for the look of terror on Harry’s face. Instead, he raised an eyebrow in challenge.

With far more caution that he’d ever shown in a Care of Magical Creatures lesson, Harry lifted the
child and carried him carefully to the sofa. Draco and Harry positioned themselves on either side of him, careful not to sit too close.

"Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?"

"Cocoa." Seth's answer was low and determined, daring Draco to default on what he'd promised earlier.

"Cocoa it is, then." Harry sounded relieved to have a task to perform and stood.

Seth pulled himself back into the sofa, tucked his knees up under his nightshirt again, and shook his head. "No," he said the loudest he'd spoken so far, though the rest of his words were in his typical mumble. "No cocoa. Thank you." He turned large, pleading eyes to Harry, who looked at Draco in confusion.

"Would you prefer that Harry stay with you, and I go to the kitchen?" Draco asked.

He nodded shyly. "Guard stay. Please."

Draco couldn't prevent a slight smirk in response both to the appellation and to the way Seth's choice fell in with his own preference. Harry wasn't as pleased obviously, and it took a pointed nod from Draco before he returned to his seat next to the child.

In the kitchen, Draco asked Kreacher to prepare the cocoa and a room, in case it was needed; it would be easily put back if it were not. To the house elf's delight, he also asked Kreacher to watch for unusual people on street, particularly if they were lurking near the house or looked to be panicking.

When the mug of cocoa was ready and Kreacher attending to the room, Draco added a child-sized portion of Sleeping Draught to the cocoa and Transfigured a clean towel into a pair of soft pyjamas. He stared at the beige and blue stripes for a moment, then transformed it to a pattern of colourful dragons instead.

He returned to find Harry and Seth staring at each other; at a guess, they hadn’t moved or spoken since he’d left. He couldn’t help grinning but waited until he could keep a straight face before speaking. “Here we are: cocoa, as promised.” Draco set the mug on the end table. “While it cools enough to drink, would you like to change into pyjamas? They’re dry and warm.”

The boy gave another of his careful nods.

“Let’s take your shirt off, okay?”

Seth hissed as Draco maneuvered the nightshirt over his head, and Draco thought he’d caught the boy’s hair in an unnoticed button. He started to apologize but fell silent when he saw the bruises that were revealed, several of which were obviously caused by fingers.

“Who did that?” Harry asked, more harshly than he had probably intended. The anger was directed at what the child must have suffered and the perpetrator, but Seth shrank back on the sofa and wrapped his arms around his torso — both to hide the marks and to protect himself — and shook his head slowly.

Draco made sure his voice was calm and low. “It’s okay. You don’t have to tell us who it was.” Yet. “But do you know who did it?” Cautiously, the boy nodded. “Does it hurt anywhere else?” This nod was given more easily.
“I think we should take you to the hospital to have you healed.” Seth looked like he was going to argue, so Draco continued. “We’ll go with you and stay with you the whole time if that would make you feel safe.”

“Guard come?” Seth asked, turning to Harry.

“Of course,” Harry replied without hesitation, and Draco’s heart caught in his throat. He had to swallow, hard, before he could speak. “Finish your hot chocolate, and we’ll go.”

They sat in silence, while Seth drank his cocoa as slowly as he could to delay their departure, but he eventually lolled against Harry’s arm, and Draco caught the mug.

Harry smiled awkwardly as he shifted the boy’s weight. “He fell asleep.”

“Of course he did. I added a Sleeping Draught to the chocolate.”

“Draco!”

“Well, we can’t very well take him to St. Mungo’s through the window if he’s a Muggle, can we?” Draco replied matter-of-factly and volunteered to go ahead for a Portkey.

Harry, still gaping, didn’t reply.

Draco Flooed into the reception of St. Mungo’s and was relieved to discover that the witch on duty was one of the few who treated everyone with the same unflagging politeness. Neither being married to Harry Potter nor his parents’ generous support of the hospital charity would grant him favours, but he would not be punished for his family’s support of the Dark Lord, either. It was a blessing, since he hoped to keep his visit as quiet as possible. When Draco reached the counter, he explained that he would be bringing in a case of suspected child abuse, and the Welcome Witch agreed to contact the appropriate Ministry liaison. When he added that there was reason to suspect the child was a Muggle — hoping she wouldn’t try to send them to a Muggle clinic — he was relieved when she simply provided him with a Portkey to a private room that was furnished as a Muggle examination room. Taking Muggle children out of the wizarding system, she explained, was far easier than the reverse, but there was no need to Oblivate people more than necessary. She also suggested that, for the same reason, a charm or potion be used on the child if he weren’t already sleeping. Draco didn’t mention that he’d already thought of that, thanked her, and left to retrieve Harry and Seth.

Only a few minutes later, he was in a white, sterile room with a number of objects, most of them metal, that he didn’t recognize. He hadn’t had time to do more than take a quick glance when there was a knock on the door. It opened to admit a woman dressed in white with light brown hair pulled into a tight braid. She glowered at Draco until she noticed Harry; then, she broke into a wide smile.

“Mr. Potter! How lovely to meet you! I’m Vera Caldwell, a Healer on staff here. And this must be the child. It’s so gratifying to know you’re still looking out for people, even when you’re hidden away so much of the time.” She turned to Draco. “You can put him on the bed,” she directed then turned back to Harry. “You Charmed him, I assume?”

Draco might have let Harry answer if she’d left it at that — he was annoyed by her dismissal of him, of course, but the lack of syrupy devotion made up for it — but after she asked the question, she giggled. Then reached up to tuck a non-existent strand of hair behind her ear. With him standing right there.

“I administered a Sleeping Potion,” Draco said flatly.
That drew her attention, and she sniffed disapprovingly before drawing her wand to cast diagnostic spells. She gasped when she finally noticed the bruising; it seemed to be enough to focus her attention on her work, at least until she finished Healing and began asking questions about the origins of the injuries. During the latter, she sent a number of pointed and suspicious looks at Draco, which he pretended not to notice.

Harry, however, was far less sanguine. Whether he’d taken their earlier conversation to heart or it was simply his ‘saving people thing’, he was near to erupting. Before he could say something scathing, Draco reached out and caught his arm to catch his attention and shook his head slightly.

Unfortunately, Healer Caldwell saw that last, and it was obvious she assumed it was another example of Draco controlling Harry’s actions.

“Mr. Potter, was there something you wanted to ask me?” To make matters worse, the saccharine voice was back, this time layered with equally cloying concern.

Thankfully, Harry chose heed Draco’s advice. “Is there a way to find out who he is? We need to return him to his family. Or find a new family for him.”

“Well, he’s definitely magical, though he could, of course, be Muggle-born and unaware of magic. Either way, we’ll be able process the results of the tests here, so it shouldn’t take too long.” Collecting her notes, she smiled at Harry, sniffed in Draco’s general direction, and left the room.

Harry moved to stare out the window, which was Charmed to depict a view of St. James Park, leaving Draco to keep Seth, who roused at the closing of the door, somehow entertained.

Fortunately, he was able to do that with less than half his attention, and he used the rest to consider Harry and the reasons he thought he didn’t deserve a family. It was a shame so many of the people Harry knew and loved who had small children had left the country. If Andromeda hadn’t taken Teddy to Switzerland or if Gringott’s hadn’t transferred Bill Weasley and his family back to Egypt, for example, Harry might have been able to develop healthy relationships with the children.

Unfortunately, those children they did see on a regular basis likely made matters worse, at least for someone as skittish as Harry. Percy and Audrey Weasley were more fastidious than even Draco’s own mother and father had been at formal events. Blaise and Parvati were perfectly reasonable parents, but the first two years after the twins were born had been so difficult, given their precarious health. They were fine now and eager to teach their younger sibling to get into trouble, but Harry still treated all of them as though they were made of glass.

It was almost enough to wish that Ron hadn’t agreed to coach the Haileybury Hammers; if he and Hermione weren’t in the wilds of Canada, one of them might have been able to provide useful advice.

After several rounds of I Seek, Seth had calmed enough to use multiple words consecutively and had even laughed, briefly, more than once. Draco was proud of himself, though the feeling dampened considerably the longer he each time he needed to devise additional entertainment.

“How many jars are on that table?”

“One, two, tree, four, fife, sis, sefen. There’s sefen! And a stetascope.”

“A stetascope? Is that what this is?” Draco asked, picking up the other item on the table.

Seth nodded.
“And what does a stetoscope do, pray?”

“Listen. Please?” He reached out his hands to take it from Draco.

He pulled it out of the boy’s reach and waved it in the air. “Are you certain? I don’t hear a thing.”

Seth giggled. “No, for listening.”

“Harry, don’t you think it’s defective?” When Harry turned to look at them, Draco was able to ask silently if it was safe for the child to hold. He hadn’t found anything problematic when he’d examined it, but he wasn’t nearly as familiar with Muggle devices as Harry. Limited by both their surroundings and the need to keep his distractions non-magical, Draco felt no guilt in handing the item to the boy once Harry confirmed it wouldn’t cause harm.

“Clearly, I’m out-voted. Why don’t you lie down on the bed and listen,” Draco suggested, hoping he might fall asleep. It was quite late for a toddler, and the limited amount of the Potion he’d consumed meant he hadn’t been asleep for more than an hour.

Once he had settled Seth, Draco looked up to see Harry staring at him sorrowfully. “You’re great with him.”

It was an odd expression, given the compliment. “Thank you,” Draco replied cautiously.

“You should have children. I shouldn’t have tried to stop you from leaving; I’m sorry.”

Before Draco could respond to that bit of tripe, Healer Caldwell returned. “If you’ll please follow me?” She invited in a tone that was neither fawning nor glaring but very neutral. She waited until Draco had picked up Seth and led them down a short, non-descript hallway. She knocked on an unmarked door, waited a moment, and opened it to usher them inside. She didn’t follow them in.

Once again, they were in a private room, but this one was an office, and it wasn’t empty. There were three people waiting for them: a tall woman dressed in Auror robes who watched them impassively, another woman in expensive professional robes who was equally imposing, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister for Magic.

Seth’s arms tightened around Draco’s neck, and Draco wrapped his own arms tighter around the child. It had been several years since he’d had his every move monitored by Aurors, but they still made him defensive and uncomfortable. Neither of those emotions — nor the attitude they would engender — would help the situation, and he was relieved when he felt Harry move to stand closer to him.

The witch in professional robes spoke first.

“Hello, Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy. My name is Honoria Barris; I’m a solicitor with the firm Giles, Peregrine, Barkwith, and Howe. The tests St. Mungo’s performed to determine the child’s identity... Well, they raised some flags. As a result, my office and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were contacted.”

Draco rubbed Seth’s back, as much for his own comfort as the child’s, and Harry put a hand on Draco’s shoulder.

Seeming to realize what they assumed, she smiled reassuringly. "Auror Cassidy is here primarily as a social services liaison and a witness. It might be easiest if we start with this." She removed from her satchel, a parchment envelope, yellow with age and still sealed. "Auror Cassidy, if you could test the magical signature on the seal, please."
The Auror nodded, stepped forward, and cast a spell. "It was sealed by Lily Evans Potter," she said in a light, clear voice.

Draco and Harry turned as one to Kingsley Shacklebolt, who nodded once.

"Lily and I were in the same year at Hogwarts, and she came to my office only a few months before... that Hallowe’en. She left this with me and asked that I make sure you received it if this situation should occur." She waved her hand toward Seth, and Draco saw his own confusion mirrored on Harry's face.

She handed the envelope to Harry, clearly expecting him to read it before they continued. He opened it with great care and slowly pulled out a letter. He looked up at Draco with a look of such pain and hope…. Draco wanted nothing more than to hold him and kiss the fear away. Since that wasn’t possible, he reached out with his free hand and smiled encouragingly when Harry clasped it tightly.

Despite his own burning curiosity, Draco tried to give Harry some privacy while he read the letter and looked for a distraction. Barris and Cassidy were speaking softly with each other, but Minister Shacklebolt noticed and made his way to their side of the room. Fortunately, Seth didn’t tense further, possibly because Draco didn’t.

The minister was one of the few past or current Aurors with whom Draco felt marginally comfortable. Part of it was the history he shared with Harry – the minister and he weren’t friends, exactly, but the minister had been over to dinner occasionally, so Draco knew him socially. More importantly, he had been one of the few investigators who hadn’t declared universal vengeance on anyone even rumoured to have Death Eater leanings. There were quite a few people dear to Draco, not the least of whom was his mother, who had benefitted from Shacklebolt’s sense of justice.

"Thank you, Minister, for assisting with the proceedings." Draco thought that would be vague enough to apply regardless of the contents of the letter and its consequences. "I hope it isn’t inconvenient."

Minister Shacklebolt smiled, with more humour than simple courtesy. “It wasn’t inconvenient at all. I happened to be at the hospital on other business.”

Harry’s hand clenched around his unexpectedly, and Draco managed, just, to turn a grunt of pain to a noise of inquiry. “Hmm?” He brushed his thumb – the only digit he could move – in calming strokes along Harry’s hand.

“I was asked to investigate an allegation that Harry Potter was being unduly influenced.” His words returned Draco’s attention to the minister. “By you, as it happens.”

Draco sighed. “You spoke with Healer Caldwell.”

The Minister nodded. “Her father-in-law is a junior Undersecretary at the ministry, and he caught me as I was leaving. I volunteered to look into it.” He paused, and, though he didn’t sound admonishing or even concerned, Draco waited on tenterhooks for him to continue. “What was it that made him finally lose his temper, her attitude toward him or you?”

That surprised a laugh out of Draco, and Seth grinned shyly in response. Before he could answer, however, Harry released his hand and noticed how tightly he’d gripped it. “Oh, I’m sorry!” He brought Draco’s hand to his lips for an apologetic kiss, then put the letter into it. He looked at Seth with an odd expression and crossed the room to speak with Honoria Barris.

Draco turned to excuse himself to the minister, who was already gesturing to the letter and moving to
follow Harry.

Dearest Harry,

As I write this, your father and I are preparing to go into hiding. It is the plan that makes the most sense, but I have a terrible feeling, so I am sending this to you, just in case.

Years ago, I made a promise, and I want desperately to keep it. If that’s not possible, it may fall to you.

My best friend as a child was a boy named Severus Snape. I doubt you would have heard of him unless your godfather’s been telling stories (he promised me he wouldn’t, so tell him he’ll be getting a good talking to if he has). Sev’s childhood years were difficult and his years at school even more so, and we talked as children about the possibility of granting him a better childhood experience. Things between us became... complicated later, but that doesn’t change the fact that it was he who introduced me to magic. I want him to experience that sort of joy.

I wasn’t able to find a perfect solution, unfortunately. If I’m... unavailable, he will appear to you at the age he was when the abuse began, not before, as it will be triggered when he was no longer safe. I’m not certain how old he’ll be — he refused to speak about it with me and likely not with anyone else.

He has appeared now because you will be able to provide a suitable environment — that is, a reasonable expectation of a safe, loving home. Knowing that, knowing you’re reading this, I am so happy: that is something every good mother wants for her child. I hope you’ve found love and joy and know what it is to give them in return — and that you’ll be willing to share them with a lost little boy.

The other side of the fact that you’re reading this, of course, is that neither I nor your father have had the opportunity to speak with you in person, and we’re lost to you, most likely dead. This grieves me, Harry, so much. There is so much I want to tell you, my darling boy, but I know I can’t fit a lifetime into a letter. Most importantly — I need you to know that, even in this time of war, you were wanted, and you are loved, desperately so. I’m sure your godfather has told you so many times over the years, but I wanted you to hear it from me directly. Know, too, that you’ve made your father and me proud. I promise.

I love you,

Mum

There was evidence of teardrops, old and new, that had fallen on the page. That was easier to process than the information in the letter. Eventually, though, Draco had to look away from the page and at the child he held. "Is your name Severus?"

"Not Seph." The child’s pale face set mulishly, and he looked over at Harry. "Set."

Draco nodded. "But was it Severus before?"

He hesitated but eventually gave a reluctant little nod before burying his face in Draco’s neck.

“The tests the hospital confirm that this is Severus Snape, by blood and magic. With the approval of the social services liaison – and the Minister,” Ms. Barris nodded at the minister, “We can grant temporary guardianship until we can find confirmation of Mr. Snape’s wishes.”

“Headmaster Snape,” Harry corrected.
“Of course,” she agreed automatically, then paused. “Does he have a portrait at Hogwarts?”

Harry nodded. “It was installed last year.” Only because the Saviour wouldn’t let up on the Board no matter how long they put it off, Draco added silently, exchanging slightly smug smiles with Harry.

“We can consult the portrait, then, if there is no mention of this situation as a possibility in the paperwork on file with the ministry.” She indicated the parchment and quill she’d set out on the desk. “If you’ll just sign here?”

Harry took the quill and held it a moment before turning to the child in Draco’s arms. “Would you like that? Would you like me to be your guardian?”

He nodded. “Guard Set,” he said firmly.

Harry looked uncomfortable, but he signed his name.

Back at the house, Draco carried a sleeping Seth up to the bedroom Kreacher had prepared. He woke as Draco was setting him on the bed and looked scared, so Draco Charmed the door to sound an alarm in Harry and Draco’s room if the door was touched. “So if you need us, you just have to touch the door, all right?” Reassured, Seth nodded and agreed to climb into bed.

Closing the light and the door behind him, Draco turned to walk down the hall.

“You’re not leaving,” Harry sounded panicked at the possibility.

Draco looked at him blankly before he remembered the argument they’d had after dinner. It felt as though it had happened weeks earlier. “I’m not leaving him here alone with you.”

“Thank you,” he sighed gratefully.

Draco was not only very tired but, after a very long and very difficult day, very peevish, and that was the last straw. “You’re the one who’s convinced he’ll be a neglectful, abusive father. You are also — do correct me if I’m wrong about this — aware of the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies, are you not?”

“I’m not going to...”

Draco cut him off. “I know that,” he said flatly and entered their bedroom.

Sev had been asked to stay in his room, which was what he'd expected. His parents liked it best when he was out of the way as well. They usually told rather than asked though. And when his Guard asked, Sev thought he might even have had him do something else if he hadn't wanted to stay in his room. But he didn't know whether the something else would have been better or worse, so he agreed to stay here.

It was a much better room than his old one. Mr. Malfoy — Draco — had filled it with interesting looking toys and books, and there was a large window with a seat that overlooked the garden, and a large bed with thick blankets and a pile of pillows. It also had curtains that could be pulled all the way around the bed! That last was his most and least favourite thing.

Inside with the curtains surrounding the bed, it was dark and quiet, and he felt very safe. At least until he remembered how much space there was between the bed and the door. It was enough that he might not hear the door open. The curtains were thick, too, so he might not hear anyone
approaching the bed. When he remembered that, he didn't like the curtains as much and couldn't bring himself to close them all the way.

Mr. Draco had closed them when he said goodnight, and Sev was able to enjoy it for a few minutes. When Mr. Draco left, Sev opened them a bit, on the side by the window. He lost that lovely dark, but he could see if... something was there.

Mr. Draco had made the door so that he and Sev’s Guard would come if he touched it. He would ask later if they would know if anyone touched it.

With Mr. Draco at work, and Sev’s Guard in his office, Sev thought he wouldn’t risk the curtains right now. He amused himself for a while with the things in the toy box, but it wasn't long before he missed his mum. She'd play with him sometimes, if his father wasn't at home. He thought they might have had fun playing with such treasure as Mr. Draco had provided. It wouldn't be possible, he knew: the Lady with the pretty red hair had said he wouldn't see his mum again, when he came here, but he would be safe from his father.

The Lady said he could trust his Guard and Mr. Draco, that they would protect him and raise him. The Lady had also said they would love him, but he didn’t expect they would. But it might be a nice thing to pretend sometimes. Like when he pretended he was Seth and belonged to them.

It would be enough that they could protect him.

But he thought he’d feel safer if they weren’t so far away.

He picked up the book about animals that looked interesting and made his way down the hall. He stopped before the open door where he heard his Guard writing, and he sat on the floor next to it. He pulled the book onto his lap and began to read the story — inside his head, so he wouldn't draw the attention of his Guard.

Draco had left the bedroom before Harry woke. Like the wall of silence that had been erected between them once Seth had been settled, it was a sign of how angry Draco continued to be.

Harry found Draco and Seth laughing in the kitchen having breakfast, though once he arrived, Draco stood. “I have to get to my lab.” Draco had a deadline looming for a very demanding client, Harry knew, so it wasn’t the abandonment it felt like.

“You’ll be safe here with Harry,” Draco added to Seth, and even Harry could tell it was as much a question about Seth’s state of mind as it was a statement.

Seth nodded. “Guard.”

Draco smiled at the boy, then Harry, and left. Suddenly, it was very quiet.

Silently, Seth stared at him with unblinking, deep, black eyes. It was strange to see them looking at him with hope and a bit of fear when he so easily remembered them filled with resentment and scorn. He wondered if things would have been different between if Professor Snape had seen him as his mother's son instead of his father's or if he himself had known that his professor might understand aspects of his life that were so hard to explain to others.

“Guard?”

Harry blinked and found himself at the table. “You can call me Harry, you know.” The boy nodded. “Okay. Well. I have some work I need to do in my study this morning. Can you play quietly while I
do that?"

The boy — Seth, Harry corrected himself — nodded solemnly.

Several very productive hours later, Harry realised he hadn't been interrupted by house elf or child even once, and he suspected that might be a bad thing.

He found Seth sooner than he expected. He’d fallen asleep next to the wall outside Harry’s office, with a picture book for a pillow. Rather than try to move him while he slept, Harry reached out to wake him. A noise or shadow woke him before Harry’s touch, and he shrank in fear at the hand coming toward him.

He seemed to relax when he realized the person next to him was Harry, but that didn’t lessen the guilt.

They ate lunch largely in silence.

Remembering his own childhood and Dudley’s, Harry thought it a bad idea to leave a child to his own devices all day and tried to think of a suitable pastime for a toddler. He wasn’t having much success, at least until he noticed Seth looking longingly at the window. Even when Harry asked if there was anything in particular he wanted to do for the afternoon, he didn’t ask, but Harry recognized the yearning.

They spent a productive couple of hours in the garden. Harry weeded the flower bed, a task he enjoyed when it wasn't forced upon him, while Seth alternated between running in circles over the grass and short but surprisingly useful stints helping Harry with the weeding.

It was during one of the latter period that he found a thick stick about seven inches long. The temptation was irresistible to the little boy, and he spent a few minutes waving it around. Watching out of the corner of his eye to make sure Seth wasn’t being reckless, Harry was startled when he waved the stick in a reasonably accurate motion for casting Wingardium Leviosa and shouted, “Abracadabra!”

Harry fell out of his crouch and gaped. Seth set his chin and said, defensively, "He said magic idn't real, but it is. Mama and Lady both said."

Harry couldn’t help but remember his years with the Dursleys. "They're right, it is real. Would you like to see some?" Seth nodded eagerly and watched, enthralled, as Harry made the gardening tools dance.

"Would you like to try?" Harry thought Seth might be in danger of detaching his head from his body, he nodded so vigorously. “The first thing you need to know is that the wand chooses the wizard. It’s a bad idea to try magic with a wand that doesn’t suit you.” Seth nodded again, this time so seriously that Harry was hard-pressed not to laugh. He handed over his trusty holly wand with due ceremony, and Seth accepted it with equal solemnity. “Give it a wave,” Harry instructed.

After a brief moment to be sure he was serious, Seth waved the wand, and his face lit with delight as a rainbow of bubbles emerged from the tip. It was tinged with anxiety when he turned to Harry, until he saw Harry’s own grin. “Excellent.”

Draco came home to find them piecing together a puzzle on the floor of the sitting room, and Seth raced forward to show Draco what he had learned earlier in the day. As tempting as it was to begin with Wingardium Leviosa — his movement had been better than anyone in their first class except, perhaps, Hermione — Harry thought the pronunciation would be a bit too difficult, so it was Lumos
that Seth cast. The light wasn't overly bright, but it was steady and clear, and he could hold it longer
than Harry would have expected. After showering Seth with praise, Draco turned to Harry, his face
shining with pride. Intended for Harry, though, not Seth, and it was terrifying.

Harry excused himself not long afterwards and hid worked in his study.

He did the same thing every evening after that.

Even Harry had to admit he was shirking when he used the Hospital Charity meeting with Narcissa
as an excuse to leave the house. Draco had looked at him with such stunned disbelief that Harry
nearly recanted. He would have done if Draco’s expression hadn’t been replaced so quickly by one
of abject disappointment: it was from that he fled. It was even more difficult to bear than the pride
had been.

Harry was surprised to find the meeting more engaging than he’d expected. The ideas being
considered for the Anniversary Festival sounded interesting and fun, and the discussion kept him
from dwelling on the situation at home. When the meeting adjourned, Narcissa insisted he join her
for tea in the hospital gardens, and Harry chose not to attempt to refuse the offer.

He regretted that decision as he listened to Narcissa try to commiserate about Draco’s misgivings
about expanding their family. He realized, finally, that this was the sort of conversation Draco had
been forced to endure every time Harry left the room and how painful it was. And it would hurt
even more if she were my mother.

When she spoke about how fortuitous it was that Seth had appeared, how well he and Draco had
bonded, Harry couldn’t stomach it any longer. “Narcissa—”

She started when he interrupted but seemed to realize that what he had to say was important. “What
is it, Harry?” she asked softly.

“You have it backwards. It wasn’t— It wasn’t Draco. It was me. I’m the one who doesn’t want
children.” Realization dawned and with it, shame. Harry nodded. “I’m sorry. Really. And I’ll find a
way to apologize to Draco, though I don’t know how I can make it up to him.” They sat in silence
for a few minutes, preoccupied with their own thoughts, before Harry continued. “Maybe— maybe
there’s a way we can transfer custody of Seth to Draco, even if the professor’s portrait never
returns.”

The ministry had confirmed there was nothing pertaining to Severus Snape’s intentions on file; when
they contacted Headmistress McGonagall, however, they were informed that the portrait of
Headmaster Snape had disappeared from its frame. Headmaster Dumbledore assured the ministry
representatives who investigated that he was fine but wouldn’t tell them where he was, so they were
left without answers until he reappeared.

“I’d like to apologize to you, as well, Harry. If we hadn’t… made assumptions…”

“You don’t owe me an apology.” Draco, on the other hand….

She nodded, in acknowledgement of the unspoken caveat, he knew, and by unspoken agreement,
they spoke of other matters. They were working on a list of suggestions to take up at the next
meeting of the hospital charity, when one of the hospital volunteers rounded a hedge at a run. Seeing
them, she stopped abruptly and fought to catch her breath.

“What’s wrong?” Narcissa asked, already half on her feet.
“Mr. Potter— needed— reception,” the aide tried to answer between deep, heaving breaths, “Mr. Malfoy—” She stopped then; there was no one left to hear her.

They rushed into the reception area and only narrowly escaped a collision with Draco himself. Harry could see no sign of physical injury, though he was obviously upset.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, scanning the reception area, “Is it Lucius?”

“It’s Seth,” Draco replied tightly.

Harry’s heart clenched. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. He collapsed suddenly. They’re examining him. But when they find out, you have to be here to authorize treatment. You’re his guardian.”

Before Harry found words, a voice came from the doors to the hallway. “Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter? Would you come with me, please?” Harry’s blood chilled at the Healer’s grave expression.

Harry returned from the meeting with his publisher to find Molly sitting with Seth. “How did it go?” she asked.

“About as well as you’d expect; he wasn’t happy. It’s nearly done, so he’d made plans for the release, and now… with….” Harry waved at the bed and the pale, still boy that slept in it. “But he understands.” And even if he hadn’t, what would he have said? Nothing would have been more important than a dying child.

“Where’s Draco?” Things had deteriorated between the two of them, and Harry knew it was mostly his fault. Despite that, they rarely left Seth at the same time, though several people, including Molly, had offered to sit with him.

“Minerva owled,” she replied, “about Severus’s portrait.”

Before she could explain further, Seth stirred at bit and sighed, “Guard?”

“I’m here, Seth,” Harry replied, though he knew he was anything but. He sat on the bed and took Seth’s frail one in his. He’d lost so much weight in the time since they’d brought him home from the hospital. It was what the doctor had told them to expect given the fever and the extreme loss of appetite, but it was a shock nonetheless. “What did you have for lunch today?” he asked, hoping the answer was anything at all.

Seth tried to shrug, but his strength and muscular control were limited, and he hadn’t put much effort into the movement. In her chair on the other side of the bed, Molly shook her head slightly. Nothing, then.

“We’ll have to feed you twice as much for dinner,” Harry said with forced cheer. Seth tried to smile, but he was already sliding back into sleep. “They’re getting shorter. The times when he’s awake.”

Molly nodded. There wasn’t much else to say.

The frustration was too much. He set the hand he held gently on the bed and stood, but pacing restlessly, and pulling at his hair gave little relief. “I hate this!” his words were harsh but low, though Seth would not wake again for hours. “I defeated Voldemort, but I can’t do anything for him. Pretty poor excuse for a guardian I am.”
"Oh, Harry. Everyone feels that way when they have the care of a sick child. It’s worse, of course, in a case like this, when all we can do is wait to see if— wait for the fever to break,” she swallowed hard before she continued, “but even with healthy children. As parents, we’re witnesses. Often that’s all we can be."

“I’m not a parent,” Harry said bluntly.

"I disagree," came Draco’s voice from the doorway. "Molly, would you mind sitting with Seth a while longer? Harry and I need to talk."

Molly agreed, of course, and Harry followed Draco down to the drawing room.

“You used to talk to me.”

Harry stared at him, bemused. “What do you mean ‘used to’?”

“I mean— Your issues with having children. I know you don’t believe you would ever abuse a child. The idea is preposterous. Your concerns about expectations were sincere, but you have very good instincts, not to mention there’s no shortage of people you can ask for guidance, and you know that. I’ve watched you with Seth, though that’s taken some effort since you’ve done your best to avoid having the three of us together in a room, at least until—” Draco cut himself off and began again, calmly. “I think you were legitimately concerned when fatherhood was an abstract concept. I think, when Seth arrived, that changed. Is that fair?”

Harry nodded, but Draco raised an eyebrow and waited. “Yes, you’re right about it being abstract.”

“Then could you clarify for me, please, what the problem is now? Because I don’t understand.”

And Harry didn’t know how to explain.

Draco exhaled in exasperation. "Is it because it’s Severus? I know you and he didn’t get on when we were in school, but he tried, Harry. The only reason the school survived that year was because of him — and not just Sytherins — he —”

“I know.” Harry spoke softly, but it was enough to stop Draco. When he continued, he spoke as quietly as Harry had. “Then why are you so determined to pull away? You obviously care for him.”

“I do! But— You’re right, and it wasn’t just the school. We owe him everything. But—“ Harry was horrified to feel tears ready to fall. “He was her Hagrid. What if people had believed— what if they had believed the accusation that he opened the chamber when we were in second year? I know how badly she wanted this. And you know what’s owed to her. And she’s right: he should have that childhood.

“But, Draco, it’s the only thing my mother’s ever asked of me. What if I can't give him the perfect childhood she wants for him? I can't let her down like that. Or him.”

Draco wrapped his arms around Harry, and Merlin, he’d missed this. “Oh, Harry.” Draco sighed. “You’re setting the impossible expectations for yourself this time. You won’t be able to give him a perfect childhood.”

Harry flinched, but Draco kept him from pulling away. “There's no such thing. There will be tantrums and tears,” he brushed Harry’s away gently, “but there will also be love and laughter. In the end, we muddle through it together.” The smile Harry gave Draco was watery, but that didn’t stop him from leaning down to give Harry a long, sweet kiss.
When they finally ended the kiss, they continued to hold each other, not saying a word but feeling everything.

“Harry! Draco!”

They blanched and raced to Seth’s room, where they found Molly in tears, wrapped around Seth. What made them stop short, though, was the bright, beaming smile on her face and the shy grin on his.

“He says he’s hungry,” Molly announced, “and his fever’s broken.”

She decided to stand near the officiant; people would be less likely to walk through her, and she’d have a better view of the people she’d come to see.

“That’s one advantage of not having a physical form: best spot in the house.”

“You came.” Lily turned to the man she’d loved for longer than she’d lived and smiled. She hadn’t really thought he wouldn’t, but it wouldn’t have been the first time he’d surprised her.

“Of course I came! I couldn’t miss seeing our first grandchild get married.” James said that with a bit too much glee, and she narrowed her eyes. “And he’s our friend.” She forgave him because he used ‘our,’ even knowing that was a good part of why he did it, and she kissed him, then turned to watch the living.

Draco was still unsteady after the scare they’d had last month, though he was well on his way to recovery if the way he glared at Harry when he was being too solicitous was any indication.

“Malfoys always land on their feet,” James said, though it was mostly habit by now, and any trace of disapproval was probably directed at Lucius, who was standing close enough to hear it. The raw longing that had been in his face as he watched Narcissa fuss with Seth’s robes became a glare directed at James, before he strode to the other side of the room.

“And Potters always choose the strong ones,” James murmured into her hair, and his arm tightened around her.

They watched as Ron came to congratulate Seth, shaking his hand with affection and pleasure. He’d come a long way since learning about Seth’s origins — for a while, Lily had feared she would be forced to find a way to make the transition from shade to ghost very belatedly and haunt him until he saw reason. He’d come around eventually, though; he always did when it mattered. Lily's lips twitched as she remembered his reaction to Seth's sorting, and a poke in the ribs told her James had noticed. "It wasn't that funny."

"I suppose." She grinned at him. "It wasn't as funny as the way you reacted when it happened."

"Lily, it was Gryffindor." Twenty years later, he still wasn't completely reconciled to the shock. "You have to admit it was a surprise."

"Not to me." She smiled as Harry laughed at something Ron had said and wrapped an arm around Seth in a loose hug. "Not to Harry." Harry had seen what she had. He was the bravest man I’ve ever known, even when he was raised as a Slytherin.

Teddy Lupin, who had moved in with them when he was nine and Andromeda's health had begun to fade, fulfilling his duties as brother and best man, came to retrieve the groom. When they took their places, the music changed to announce the bride.
Lily watched Harry and Draco stand, but before they turned to face the rear of the church, they smiled encouragingly at their son.

Life wasn't perfect.

Draco was still high-handed and overly traditional at times, and Harry was more stubborn than a family of mules, to borrow a phrase from her own mother. But they had learned their lesson and were careful to talk about things, particularly those they didn’t want to confess. They had been excellent role models, as people, as partners, as parents, and she knew that Seth would, in that, follow in their footsteps.

“Hey,” James whispered in her ear, “You’re going to miss the best part,” and she turned her attention to the couple before the altar.

“I, Seth Evan Potter-Malfoy, take you, Rose Minerva Weasley, to be my wife....”

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